BURY THEIR
BONES
WICKED FORTUNES: BOOK TWO
AJ MERLIN

BURY THEIR BONES

OceanofPDF.com

WICKED FORTUNES BOOK TWO

OceanofPDF.com

A J MERLIN

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2021 by A J Merlin

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover design by Book Cover By Design

Bury Their Bones, Wicked Fortunes (Book Two) by AJ Merlin

1. FIC009050 **FICTION** / Fantasy / Paranormal 2. FIC024000 **FICTION** / Occult & Supernatural

3. FIC072000 **FICTION** / LGBT / Bisexual

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-7348846-7-8 eBook ISBN: 978-1-7348846-6-1

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32

Acknowledgments

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

The front door sat unlocked.

Anyone could walk in, and I had a list of people who I did not want stomping through the red front door of the New Orleans suburb abode I shared with my cousin.

Merric the Kitsune was at the top of that list…but the threat of a fox invasion had been dwindling as of late. I wasn't relieved. If anything, I missed him. Just a bit.

In fact, I hadn't seen him at all since our last group date. I'd thought… well I'd supposed that he'd stick around at least to make good on his threats of the favors I owed him, but it seemed that he was no longer interested in even those. If his two-week absence was anything to go by.

Truthfully, Merric didn't need a door to fuck up my day, but having it locked anyway would do a lot for my feeling of security.

I walked to the door and locked it firmly, casting a glance around the living room one more time.

Couch pushed out of the center of the room.

Television off.

Side door closed.

I checked my phone one more time, just in case Marin had decided to call me in on my day off from working at the small magic store in the preternatural quarter of the city.

She hadn't.

"Okay, George." I cleared my throat as if I was about to deliver a speech. I reached up to adjust glasses that weren't there in an old habit that was slow to die.

After losing control to my wolf and ultimately letting my wolves loose on Collette, I'd started to notice my vision rapidly improving.

Not that I'd been legally *blind* before. I'd only needed them for distances. Now, those distances were as clear to me as if I looked through binoculars.

When I'd told my mother about it, she'd attributed it to my magic slowly fixing it now that I was using *all* of my magic more.

"Nothing to worry about. Nothing you haven't done a hundred times." I clapped my hands in front of me. As if that would do something to relieve the tension I felt.

Except, that wasn't quite true.

I'd only successfully summoned the Form of the Moon *once.* And that had been very recent.

Sucking in a deep breath, I checked the corners and the shadows of the room once more for my sly, foxy friend.

Nothing.

I squared my shoulders–aware even to myself that I was just stalling–before reaching a hand out in front of me like I was plucking my card from thin air.

And, in a way, I was. Magic swirled and curved around my fingers, visible only as small glittering particles over my skin. I took my time. With my other two cards, the Devil and the Chariot, I could do this in my sleep.

The Moon was so very different.

The magic intensified, and the floor around my feet reflected the light from my hand as I closed my fingers around a corporeal tarot card of the major arcana.

The wolves that danced on the Moon card seemed to glimmer at me in the dim light. I pushed my magic through the card, just a little, just to test the waters.

Then the card pushed back. *Hard.* Like someone had shoved me backward.

I gasped, barely keeping my grip on the magic that solidified the presence inside my card. I wouldn't let it go as I had in the cemetery. *I* controlled this magic. Not the other way around.

Slowly, the card disintegrated in my hand into a shower of sparks. Where the sparks landed on the hardwood floor, a shape grew into being, and butterflies flew around my gut.

It was a wolf.

The creature was just as white as my own canine shape, with ghostly eyes that seemed to glow and reflect the light from my magic.

It felt different from my other two cards. Like it wasn't an empty vessel waiting on my command, but waiting to see if it was willing to obey.

"Why are you different?" I murmured, reaching my hand forward towards the wolf.

It regarded me with that eerie, colorless gaze but didn't reply. If it had, I would've assumed I was going nuts.

My fingers touched the cold nose, traveling up the lightly furred muzzle. It was strange, as if I could press hard enough to make my fingers phase right through the creature.

The wolf didn't move.

Instead, magic from the Moon seemed to pull at me, demanding more. I clamped down hard, hand coming away from the half-corporeal wolf's face.

"No," I said flatly. "We're not doing that." Still my hand trembled at the effort of holding my magic back from the card. The wolf tilted its head, only watching.

But *how* could it be watching, or even caring what I was doing? It was just a vessel for my damn magic. It wasn't *alive.*

If I didn't know better, I would've thought it was absolutely alive and judging my fitness for the spell. Or trying to find the time to strike.

The loud jingle of *Poor Unfortunate Souls* blasting from my phone made me jump, my attention diverted.

The wolf lunged, leaping easily off of the floor and coming for my face with jaws wide and menacing, though no noise came from the form of the card.

I yelped, stepping back and raising my hands in front of my face to guard myself. Belatedly, I severed the ties to my magic, just as the wolf's jaws passed through my face to leave an uncomfortable tingle in their wake.

Before the Form hit the floor again, it was gone. The card solidified in my hand, then disappeared back into the depths of my magic. As if it had never existed at all.

My phone rang again and I sighed, eyes scanning the living room around me as if more wolves of the Moon might be sneaking through the room.

But I was alone with the dulcet tones of Ursula the Sea Witch assaulting my ears.

Grabbing my phone before it could go to voice mail a second time, I brought it to my ear.

“Hey, Yuna,” I greeted, not needing to check the caller id to know who I’d assigned this ringtone to.

So far, she didn’t know. I had a feeling she wouldn’t be as amused as I was by my choice of song for her.

“*What are you doing?”* Yuna asked, as abrupt as ever. No preamble. No useless hellos or ‘I hope you’re not doing something stupid like summoning forces beyond your control in your living room.’

“Cleaning,” I replied, only half-lying. I pushed the sofa away from the wall easily with my foot, glad for my hybrid strength in harrowing times such as these.

“*…Are you?”* She sounded disbelieving, though I was sure I didn’t know why.

“Yep. What’s up?”

“*Do you want to go get lunch?”*

If she had been Indra, she would’ve danced around the question to make sure she wasn’t impeding on any of my already-set plans. As it was, Yuna didn’t seem to care much that I might be doing something else.

“I could do that. Sushi?”

“*Yes. Ocean King’s Daughter again?”*

“Sure, I don’t mind.” Sushi wasn’t my favorite, but we’d found a place that catered to my need for more pedestrian foods such as sandwiches and burgers.

Especially burgers right now.

The thought made me subconsciously run my tongue over my teeth, as if the full moon next week had snuck up on me early somehow.

That was another conversation I wasn’t looking forward to having. As a hybrid, I was just as prone to Bad Moon Behavior as any other were. None of my new friends knew it yet, and I wasn’t sure just how much they’d thought about it.

Probably not at all, but I still needed to bring it up. I’d already started eating more red meat than usual, and had been a touch quicker to anger for the past couple of days.

Unless I was planning on going on a three day vacation in the middle of next week, my friends needed to know what they were in for.

Of course, I'd save them from the worst of it. While I did not expect to go full furry-melt down when the full moon rose, I knew that I would be rather intense and quite possibly hard to deal with.

If anyone asked, I'd be home sick that night.

However, it wasn't like my calendar was filled with dates. I wasn't expecting anyone to ask.

"*You okay?*" Yuna's voice snapped me out of my thoughts like a whip. "*You went quiet on me there.*"

"Sorry. I was just thinking." I finished shoving the sofa back into place. "When do you want to meet?"

"*I'll head over if you want to go on and leave.*"

"I can do that."

"*I'll see you soon.*" She hung up without waiting on a reply. I didn't take it personally. It was just who she was.

Instead I walked quickly to my room to change into a pair of nicely fitting jeans, sneakers, and a black t-shirt that I pulled out of a newly acquired bag. After ripping the tags off and pulling the shirt on, I checked the mirror to make sure I hadn't missed any other stickers.

Ursula graced the front of it and it brought a grin to my face. I wasn't sure what Yuna's familiarity with old myths and Disney movies was, but lately I felt like she was trying to keep the sea witch part of herself from me.

I was doing everything in my power to persuade her in the opposite direction.

I wasn't afraid of her, or what she might look like when she wasn't on land. She'd told me a little. And I had internet. Though admittedly, most of the search results for 'octopus mermaid' turned up purple and musical. I doubted Yuna became either of those when submerged. Sure, she was intimidating and commanding and a little bit brutal, but those certainly weren't bad things.

The pink in my hair was beginning to fade, but I didn't worry about it now as I twined my mostly blonde hair up into a messy bun on my head. That was another task for another day.

The trip in my SUV took only about fifteen minutes, and when I pulled into the restaurant's parking lot I found Yuna standing against the wall,

waiting. She hadn’t gone in without me, and stood instead like she was posing for any random photographer that might pass by.

Her long, shiny black hair fell in waves to her waist, and reflective aviators hid her gaze from mine. She was pale, even during a summer of intense sun and time spent in or near the water. As always, she looked like she was dressed to either hang out at some exclusive club or stomp out a rival gang.

When I opened the door to my SUV she grinned, removing her aviators to show eyes fixed on my t-shirt. “Be a little more direct,” she said to me slyly. “I didn’t get it last week when you hung that up.”

She pointed at the plushie octopus keychain dangling from my mirror. I grinned sheepishly. “I wasn’t sure you knew who Ursula was,” I admitted.

“Well I don’t live under a rock,” she shot back.

How would I know? Yuna showed up when and where she wanted. I had no idea *where* she lived. Under a rock in the river was definitely on my list of possibilities.

“I don’t,” she assured me when I only raised my brows.

“Then where do you live?” She didn’t answer, only grinned. Because of course she did.

As I followed her inside, I couldn’t help but sigh wistfully in envy. It wasn’t self-pity. Not really. I was very comfortable with myself, but I would never have the cat-like grace and serpentine elegance that Yuna seemed to possess at all times. The waitress stared at her as she walked in, the same one we’d had before, and I watched her eyes light up as she looked between us.

Yeah, girl, take your shot, I encouraged mentally. *Maybe get shot down now so I can stop watching you moon over my–*

I forced my brain to stop dead at that thought. It was surely too early to be staking any kind of claim over Yuna, or anyone.

The waitress brought us to a window booth, laying the thin menus in front of us before hesitating.

Yuna looked up at her, eyebrows raised.

The soft music of the blue and black painted restaurant seemed to get louder in the time it took for the waitress to decide just what she wanted to ask.

“Do you…” the waitress trailed off. “What do you want to drink?” She amended.

“Water with lemon,” Yuna replied.

The waitress barely spared me a glance.

“Same,” I told her, a small smile playing at my lips that I was sure my lunch companion caught.

The waitress nodded and walked away quickly.

“So. Should I be grateful that you made time for me in your busy schedule?” I pressed, sliding my elbows forward on the black lacquered table. “Or was this a lazy day off for you?”

Yuna thumbed through the menu like she might get something new. “You could just ask me what I do with my days,” she pointed out.

“I did that last week, remember? At this same booth.”

She grinned at me with a mouthful of shiny white teeth that could so easily become needle-like fangs at her whim.

“Oh yes. I do remember, actually.”

I pressed my lips together to keep from grinning. Now that our time together was less ‘fight-or-die’ and more ‘is-that-your-hand-on-my-butt,’ I had come to realize that while she was intimidating and always in charge of the situation, Yuna also seemed to take any chance to keep me guessing.

The waitress came back, sliding dark-tinted glasses of water onto the table in front of us before focusing the brunt of her attention on Yuna again.

Had she put on more makeup? Her lips definitely looked glossier and redder than I remembered. I rested my head on my hand, elbow propped on the table as I waited for my turn to order.

Hopefully the waitress would remember I existed.

“Do you know what you want? Are you trying something new, or do you want the OKD roll again?” The waitress asked in a rush.

Yuna looked up slowly, surveying our waitress. Not for the first time I appreciated that she was the only person I’d ever met with teal eyes.

At least I could swoon a little without her saying anything when she was focusing all that attention on someone else.

Was it just me, or did the waitress *gulp?*

“What do you want?” The cecaelia asked, looking towards me instead of answering the waitress.

“Me?” I blinked, surprised. “Uh, can I get a bacon cheeseburger? Rare? Just cheese and bacon and ketchup and the bun.”

The girl hesitated, then scribbled down my order. “Fries?” She asked brusquely.

“Sure.”

“And I’ll just do the OKD roll again,” Yuna added, handing off our menus. “Thanks.” The word was clearly a dismissal, and the waitress left.

“She likes you,” I pointed out, tearing off strips of the paper on one of our straws. “She *wants* you.”

Yuna shrugged. “It’s not mutual.”

“You sure? You give me a lot of leeway with the troublesome trio, and the least I can do is give it back.”

“And with the fox.”

“What? *No.* You know very well I’m not with him.”

“For all I know, he kidnaps you in your dreams and spirits you away to some illusory sex dungeon.” She ripped her straw free of the paper and dunked it in her water.

“Is that….really what you think about at night in your….waterside apartment?” I asked, making a guess as to where she might live.

“Didn’t I live in an underwater cave on Sunday?” Yuna shot back.

“You didn’t confirm that, so we’ve moved on.”

“And *up.* Now it seems I even get a real bathroom.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes, and I didn’t miss the triumphant grin on Yuna’s face. “Is it really a secret? You know where I live. You’ve been to my house four times!”

“It wasn’t originally. But then you got really hung up on it and started guessing. So now, I like you not knowing.” She flashed her very white teeth in a wide grin.

“I wish you’d tell me. Or invite me over.” I batted my eyelashes at her like it might do anything.

She snorted.

“Maybe next week,” she bargained. “So I have time to tidy up.”

“Yuna, you do not strike me as the type of person who ever needs to ‘tidy up,’” I informed her. “And uh, I will most likely be unavailable.”

Next week was the full moon.

Yuna narrowed her eyes in confusion. “Is that shop witch kidnapping you to work the whole way through? Or is it a Cian-thing?”

“It’s the full moon,” I answered slowly.

“Right. On Wednesday. What about the other six days of the week?”

“I’m just not so fun to be around,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t want to inflict that on you.”

“Is it really so bad? You’re not a full werewolf.”

“Depends on who you’re asking. Mom says that when I was a kid, I would turn into a wolf and ransack the house.” I played with the edges of the paper napkin, shredding the edges between my fingers.

“Do you have plans to ransack the house next week?” Yuna smoothed her own napkin as if making a point.

“Goddess, I hope not. That would be embarrassing.”

“So you’re…what? Chaining yourself to the wall? Avoiding all of us like the plague? Is Aveline moving out for the week?” Watching me carefully, she waited for me to finish tearing the paper napkin.

“What? No, of course not. It’s not *that* bad.”

“Then why block out the whole week?”

“Well, it’s…I just don’t want to be a bitch to any of you,” I tried to explain. I was being *courteous.* Was that so unheard of? I wouldn’t kill anyone, but I was always more intense during the week of the full moon.

“If that’s what makes you comfortable,” the cecaelia shrugged. She paused when the waitress reappeared with both our plates.

“Everything look all right?” The girl asked, still very obviously talking to Yuna and not me.

The sea witch spared her no attention. “You have everything?” She asked me instead.

I fought to hide a smile. “Yes, *mother*,” I told her with amusement after I’d checked my burger to make sure it was what I’d ordered.

“We’re fine. Thanks. And you can go on and bring me the check so I can get that paid,” Yuna said.

“What?” I looked up, a fry wavering near my lips. “Yuna, it’s fine. I can pay for my own.”

“Ignore her,” my date said. “Single check. Straight to me.”

The waitress looked between us finally, taking in my distressed frown. “She looks like she wants to pay…” the girl protested. I couldn’t decide if I was grateful that she was on my side, or mentally ruffled at her words.

“She also looks like she doesn’t mind that you’re doing your best to ignore her in favor of me,” Yuna pointed out. “But I wasn’t going to say anything.”

Ouch. I saw the waitress flush, a guilty expression finding her face.

Yuna’s smile was beatific, and I had to fight to hide my own nervous giggling.

“I’ll be back,” the waitress mumbled, and made a hasty retreat.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I informed the cecaelia. “She just has a crush. It’s impossible *not* to. I mean-have you seen you?”

“Frequently,” Yuna assured me. “I brush my teeth in front of my mirror every morning, same as the rest of you, I promise.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

While I was not questioning the existence of a black rooster with oil-slick bright feathers, I *was*, in fact suspicious at there being one in my front yard.

I closed the door of my SUV behind me, half shifted and ready with magic rising in my chest that awaited my call.

It hadn't been so long ago that two witches had kidnapped me only a few steps from here. I wasn't looking to repeat the experience.

To my surprise, the rooster did not morph into a person, monster, or any combination thereof. It picked at the grass in front of the porch, not paying me any attention.

"Okay?" I approached it slowly, deliberately, and checked for any scant trace of magic as I walked.

Still nothing.

Finally, I stepped close enough to kneel beside it. The rooster looked up at me, tipping its beak this way and that, before apparently deciding I wasn't worth the trouble and going back to its careful survey of the ground.

"Are you lost?" I asked, reaching a hand out to flick my fingers against the tips of its tail. It took a step forward, and I did it again. Did some of the neighbors keep chickens?

Belatedly I looked up, wondering if I might be able to see where this rooster on my front lawn had come from. If someone on the street had built a chicken coop, I surely would've smelled it before now.

"Seems you don't know your New Orleans supernatural lore very well, do you?" A smooth voice asked with a rich creole accent..

My heart dropped.

I stood abruptly, calling back all of my power as my tail curled at my waist. “Who are you?” I demanded, even before I’d given the man leaning against my SUV a good look.

He didn’t move. Even when my magic buffeted him in the threat I’d meant it as, he only leaned against my SUV in his dark violet suit like he didn’t feel a damn thing.

Red eyes glittering, the stranger smiled and lifted his hands in surrender. “My bad. I sometimes forget that mortals don’t normally sense me coming. I just figured you knew I was here.”

“Did you really?” Surveying him carefully, I found myself at a loss. He *felt* magical. Like a witch. I was usually able to tell if someone practiced magic like I did, though I wasn’t sure exactly how to explain the magical sense that told me that.

But something was different with this man. He was magical, witch-like, but also not. If I had only been looking at him, I would’ve assumed by his red gaze that he was a vampire.

His lips parted as his grin widened. Those were definitely fangs in his mouth.

But even Cian, powerful and gifted as he was, didn’t feel like *this.*

“I did not,” the man admitted. “But don’t tell anyone. I have to take my kicks where I can get them, and mortal surprise is one of the few I can count on.”

Mortal surprise? I’d never been called *mortal* by another preternatural. Sure, compared to the agelessness of vampires, my four-century lifespan might be *considered* mortal…but it was still a strange term to be thrown around.

My confusion must’ve shown on my face. The man chuckled. “I’m not trying to be this difficult,” he promised.

“Then why are you here?” I asked levelly, erring on the side of caution rather than confidence. I didn’t want to threaten someone who could very easily grind me under their heel. “I don’t even know who you are.” My stomach twisted in knots, though I tried not to let my nervousness show.

He looked very pointedly down at the rooster that now picked at the grass around my feet. “Even with the rooster? I know it’s not *mine,* but I didn’t think you’d enjoy it as much if I dropped voodoo dolls on your head or sent you a bottle of rum and peppers. I was trying to be subtle.”

“….What?” I could only think to ask.

“This is kind of embarrassing. Are we so esoteric that you don’t know that the rooster is the symbol of *Maman Brigitte*?”

It was difficult to be so on edge with my magic tingling my palms in response to his presence and his nonchalance. I was still no closer to knowing what he was.

“Could we perhaps start over?” I asked at last, pulling my attention from the rooster. “My name is George. I live here, and I am a wolf-witch hybrid.” I shifted to stand on the balls of my feet like I was ready for a fight. “Your turn.”

“Same format, I’m assuming?” He inquired.

“I can write down the template if you prefer?”

“No, no, let me try this.” He cleared his throat and shook out his hands like he was preparing for a dramatic production. “I am Baron Samedi. I live a little ways away, and I am a Loa.”

I stared at him, nonplussed and deadpan.

Baron Samedi, he’d said.

Loa, he’d said.

Surely there wasn’t a *real* voodoo deity standing on my front lawn. As far as I knew, gods didn’t actually exist.

“…What?” I asked finally.

“Do I need to repeat it?”

“Yes, please.”

“Which part?”

“All of it.”

“Ah, I gotcha.” He clapped his hands together. “Mortal surprise again. I like it. Well.” He pointed at the rooster, and with a surprised cluck, it vanished in a puff of smoke.

I jumped back from where it had been like I might be next.

“You killed it!” I gasped, heart beating fast.

“I sent it home,” he dismissed. “She’d kill *me* if I harmed one of her chickens.”

“Right. Okay.” I rolled my shoulders to ease the tension in my neck and stared at him across the battlefield of my front lawn. “So, what do you want?”

“Did you still want me to repeat my introduction?”

“Is anything in it going to change?”

His answering smirk was enough.

“Then no. My hearing is just fine.” I took a deep breath, looking him over like his words had changed what I might see. “You don’t look like… what you say you are,” I observed cautiously. Apart from the eyes and fangs, he looked human.

“Didn’t you hear? It’s casual Thursday.”

“Are you going to give me a straight answer at all?”

His pearly white teeth flashed. “Do you think you should be demanding any kind of answer from me that I haven’t freely given you?”

I expected some kind of power display. I thought perhaps the air would go heavy or cold or blood might rain from the sky if he was really a voodoo deity like he’d said.

But nothing changed.

“I’m not too sure I’m sold on the whole Loa thing,” I admitted. “New Orleans is a big place. I’ve met seven guys telling me they were actually Merlin. Why should I believe *you’re* who you say you are?”

It wasn’t meant to be confrontational, but the words slipped out anyway.

“Because Merlin is dead, and his remains were burned a long time ago, and I have fangs.” He opened his mouth to point at his canines. “And I brought a rooster.”

“Okay. O*kaaaay.*” I scrubbed my palms against my jeans to relieve the itch of so much magic ready to go. “What do you *want?”*

“My brother invited you to visit us,” Baron Samedi explained.

“No, he didn’t.”

“He most certainly did. He came home laughing about how he scared you and knocked you out of his taxi.”

“Sorry–your brother, *a Loa*, is a taxi driver?” My mind clicked back on what he meant, and I instantly remembered the dark-skinned man with strange, ghostly eyes talking about my fortune in a very creepy way.

I’d written him off as just weird.

My mistake.

“When he wants to be. We all have our hobbies. He thought you’d come looking for us, since he asked so nicely. I told him and the others that you had a lot on your plate.” His smile widened sweetly. “You should be grateful. They were going to come get you, and I doubt they would’ve dropped a rooster in your yard.”

“Why?”

“Because you are the most interesting thing that’s happened in this city in decades, if not centuries.”

I weighed my options. If he really was what he said-and my reasons not to believe him were dwindling-then was I in any real danger of him? The Loa, a powerful force in voodoo culture, were neutral by nature, and I’d never read or seen anything about them ransacking the city or murdering anyone unjustly.

“Give me your word that you aren’t lying to me,” I said slowly. “That you don’t intend to hurt me.”

His eyes glittered. “I give you my word,” he replied solemnly when I had expected some kind of joke or jibe. “I have no intent to hurt you. Neither do any of my kin. When you wish to leave, I will bring you right back to this spot myself.”

I let out a breath and let my magic recede into myself. “Okay. So… where are we going? Did you drive here or something?” If Akiva were here, he’d be rolling his eyes, and I was sure I’d get an earful from any of my friends–except Merric–about my habit of just diving into things.

Baron Samedi barked out a laugh. “*Drive*? What do you take me for?” He closed the distance between us and offered one long-fingered hand. Rings glinted in the light, their mismatched surfaces and gems winking up at me in the sun.

“Are we going to *fly?”* I asked dubiously, resting my much paler hand in his. “Or are we–“

The world *jerked* suddenly like I’d been caught in a giant shepherd’s hook that rested against my lower back and yanked me off my feet.

I gasped, the world around me spinning, then darkening, before finally being set on my feet once more.

My head still spun, and I staggered away from the Loa, who grinned. “It’s a little hard to get used to. Give it a few more chances before you write off my traveling spell.”

A few more chances? I was expecting this to be a one-time affair.

“I didn’t know spells like that existed,” I mumbled. “Doesn’t it take a lot of magic to move yourself and another person?”

“They don’t exist, outside of me. And it does.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know how to respond to that. I took a moment to look around, shocked to see that this didn’t look like anywhere I’d been before.

It didn’t even *feel* like the weather in New Orleans. A breeze ruffled my hair, bringing the strong scent of fish and saltwater. “Where are we?” I asked, finding that we stood on the cross-sections of a white sidewalk surrounded by tall, rustling trees.

When had the sun started to set?

“My family’s home.”

“Which is…where?”

“Further than you’ve been before.”

That answered none of my questions.

“Do I smell the ocean?” I asked, my ears flicking to pick up the soft crunch of leaves being stepped on.

“Come on.” The Baron tugged on my arm, leading me down the white sidewalk.

The trees cleared out, giving me a glimpse of the empty horizon not impeded by buildings or people. Wherever we were, it was empty.

I shivered, wishing I had something more than my t-shirt.

The white stone under us widened, becoming a large patio with the far end enclosed by a fence. Stairs disappeared on either side, confusing me as to where we were. Was there a building under us? There hadn’t been one behind us, unless it was further through the trees, and the sky on the other side of the rail was confusing.

A large fountain decorated the middle of the stone patio, the sounds of flowing water hushed in the deep pool edged with dark bushes. Furniture was placed around the area, and a stone fire pit cast an eerie glow around the entire area that competed with the light from multiple, decorative lamp posts.

And we weren’t alone. I could smell people before I saw them, but moments after I caught the scent, my sharp eyes picked out four people on the stone patio.

Were they speaking? If so, I couldn’t hear it.

I hesitated, but the Baron drew me forward, hand still clasped around my arm. “We won’t hurt you,” he reminded me, then stopped and released my arm.

“So he says.” The woman closest to us who glared into the fountain had heard him. She lifted her head, thick black hair tumbling down her shoulders around a sharp-featured and beautiful face. “But there are so *many* ways to do harm.”

My stomach plummeted to the ground.

The Baron shot her a look before walking away and leaving me alone. I watched as he approached a woman on a long, white cushioned couch and sat down next to her. Both of them watched me, red eyes bright.

“Who are you?” I asked, clenching my hands into fists until my nails bit into my palms. I turned to the woman at the fountain.

“Did he not tell you?” The woman’s accent was much richer than the Baron’s.

“If I’m going to believe that he’s a Loa, and that you are too, then I still have to ask,” I said apologetically. “My knowledge of Voodoo lore isn’t good enough for me to make a guess.”

Her eyebrows raised ever so slightly. “You don’t believe him?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Then how else are you here, when we are nowhere near your city, if not for magic beyond what any *witch* could do?” She tilted her head towards the far rail. “Come see.” She didn’t reach for me, but she did wait until I’d started walking before leading me through the stone patio, past the fire, and to the railing where another man stood.

For a moment, I didn’t think to look at what lay in front of me. Not when I instantly recognized the man from the taxi ride weeks ago.

He turned to look at me, a grin playing at his lips and his eyes ghostly blue.

“You,” I breathed. I blinked away the image of his smile in the taxi, so many weeks ago. I knew him.

“My brother says you did not mean to slight my invitation,” he remarked in a deep baritone, his accent as thick as the woman’s. “I am not so sure I believe him.”

“I didn’t know…And I don’t see–“

Wordlessly, the woman tugged me around to face the railing with her. As if that might answer my silent questions.

Finally, I looked out across the sky in earnest.

And saw the *ocean*.

The sun set to my left, giving the water an orange and pinkish glow. In front of me sprawled a forest, on a lower level of the island, with white sidewalks peeking through the branches, and a small castle-like building set at the other side. The edges of the land dropped away, waves lapping at the cliffs that held this place high above them.

“Where are we?” I whispered again.

“This is not New Orleans,” the woman at my side informed me. “This is barely your world at all. *Now* do you believe we are who my brother says?” Her tone was impatient.

Turning to look at her, I took in her dark bronze skin, crimson eyes, and the fangs that glittered between her parted lips. She felt magical, just like the Baron had.

“But…” I looked back at the man on my other side. He watched me half as intently, his stance lazy and barely interested. “But what do you want with *me?*”

“They want your surprise,” the woman sitting with Baron Samedi called, no louder than she had to. “They wanted to see your face just as it is now. But now that is done, and we wish to talk.”

“About *what*?”

“About *everything.”*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

Everything was a broad topic, though I did not say as much. What did I have to discuss with supposed deities? My heart fluttered in my chest as if it was trying to fly back to New Orleans.

My fingers curled and uncurled on the smooth railing under my skin, but I pushed myself away from it to look instead at the five Loa.

Except for the man standing beside me, all of them shared the red eyes of being vampires. Why was he different?

"What could you have to talk to me about?" I asked carefully.

The woman on the sofa gestured graciously to the chair sitting in front of her. "Won't you sit?"

Was it really an invitation?

"Thank you," I allowed, hesitantly walking to the cushioned chair and perching carefully on the edge of it. My hands rested on the wooden arms, and I stayed ready to push myself right back to my feet.

"I understand you must have questions," the woman said. While all of them appeared to be in their late twenties to early thirties, she had the oldest air to her out of them all. Her skin was warm, a rich caramel, and her eyes were like rubies set against her face. Her black hair curled loosely, cascading down her shoulders and nearly to her waist.

All of them were dressed formally in clothes that looked perfect against the lush and luxurious setting.

In my jeans and t-shirt, I felt sorely out of place.

"If you're really the Loa, why care about me?" I asked at last. "It's obvious I have very little knowledge of your culture, and I don't have any practitioners in my family."

“True,” the blue-eyed man chuckled behind me. “You’re as W*iccan* as they come.” He said it like an insult and I fought not to sneer in response.

“Then let me introduce my family. I believe you know he is the Baron Samedi.” She rested her hand on the man’s shoulder who’d brought a rooster to my yard. He beamed.

“Behind you stands the Baron Kriminel.” At her words, the blue-eyed man swept me a low bow. He was the most muscular of the group, when the rest of them were willowy and lean. Everything about him simply screamed *different.* Like Samedi, his hair was cut very close to his head.

“And at *your* other side is Marinette Bras Cheche.” That couldn’t be her full name. Maybe it was a title, instead.

Marinette did not bow. She stared at me, her eyes bright and her mouth pressed into a line like I had done something to offend her. She did not speak, and I did not offer any words of my own.

“You should care the most whether or not *I* like you,” Marinette promised suddenly, breaking her silence.

“Because…why?” I asked, unable to find even a half plausible reason.

“Because you are a *wolf.*” She didn’t say more than that, and I didn’t pry. I wasn’t going to shudder at the implied threat. Frankly, I was looking to move past the posturing.

“Nibo doesn’t share our interest in you,” the still unnamed woman went on after leveling a look at Marinette. Her hand flicked to indicate the man who sat on the far side of the fountain. From here, I couldn’t see much of him, and he didn’t seem to care about changing it.

“And I am Maman Brigitte.” My gaze found her again, and as I watched, she brought a lit cigar to her lips.

Making a mental note to research the Loa when I got home, I impatiently waited for her to finish the long drag on the cigar.

“I’m George,” I introduced, when it was evident she was waiting for me to speak.

“You are Georgette Levasseur,” Maman Brigitte corrected. “The first summoner in your line in generations. I knew your great-great-grandmother.”

“Just…George,” I corrected automatically. “Only my mom calls me Georgette.” I kept my voice firm. She did not deign to correct herself. The rest of her words sunk in a bit more slowly.

“Was she your friend?” I asked, surprised. I’d never met *any* of my grandparents, and certainly no one further back.

A smile touched the woman’s lips, and she traded a look with Baron Samedi. It was obvious she knew more about my family than I did, and the thought made me both uncomfortable and unprepared.

“Your ancestress and I were not friends,” she informed me dryly. “But I held much respect for her.” Her eyes searched mine, and her lips parted as if she would continue.

Then she pressed her lips together before lifting the cigar to her lips again.

Baron Samedi glanced at her but remained silent.

“I wish to see how alike the two of you are,” the Loa continued, smoke trailing from her lips like a dragon.

“What do you mean?” My skin prickled. “I’m a summoner, like her. I don’t know anything more about her.”

“And you have her three favorite cards, do you not? The Moon, the Chariot, and the Devil.”

“I do.” I wasn’t sure I liked where this was going. The wind that carried the smells of the ocean whipped my hair around my face suddenly. The sun was dipping below the horizon, painting the patio in orange light, but none of them seemed inclined to move for better light.

“Then show me.”

I shook my head. “Tell me why first.”

“Because she asked you *very* nicely,” Marinette murmured from somewhere behind me.

My fingers clenched on the armrests of my chair, and I fought not to jump upward and demand to go home.

“I don’t mean anything by it.” Maman Brigitte’s eyes were strangely goading. “I just want to see.”

Seeing the cards wasn’t going to put me in danger. I could summon the physical cards to me at will. It was a simple task to pull them from my magic, after all.

But that didn’t make it a good idea. Maybe she’d help me, or give me some information on my family. On the other hand, what if she meant something less helpful by her words?

I brought them to me anyway, lifting my hand and willing the three cards to appear. When they did, I held them splayed in my grip so that she

could see the faces of the three arcana, but didn't go further than that.

She was not going to touch them. Letting her see them was as far as I was willing to go.

Thankfully, she didn't ask. She looked at the cards, her red eyes steady and unblinking. Baron Samedi at her side looked at me instead, studying my face like she studied the cards.

It was unnerving, and I looked away after a few seconds had gone by.

"They like you," Maman Brigitte said at last, surprising me.

"Like…me?" I asked. "But they're just Arcana. They can't *like* anyone." Just like they couldn't make decisions or have expectations. Just like they couldn't pull magic from me and act of their own will.

Her gaze slid to mine. "Do you really think that?"

"That's what I learned," I replied carefully.

"More's the pity that there's a list of things you must *un*learn," she said, not unkindly but still with a firm edge to her voice.

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged daintily, shifting her legs under her layered black dress so she could lounge on the sofa and take another drag on her cigar.

"Could I be so rude as to ask you to summon one of them for me?"

Rude wasn't the word I would've used. I didn't owe her my magic, nor should I have to make a spectacle of myself.

But was it such a good idea to say no?

"And then you'll tell me *why* you care so much?" I bargained in reply.

Maman Brigitte nodded easily at my demand. "Of course."

When I moved to focus my magic on the Chariot, she spoke again. "Not that one."

Startled, I looked into her eyes. Had she known which card I was summoning? And why did she *care*?

She was grinning now, the look less friendly than it had been a moment ago. "Not that one," she repeated.

"I didn't know you had a preference," I mumbled as I zeroed in on the Devil.

"I do. And it isn't for *that* one, either."

I let out a breath in a huff, displeasure curling my mouth down at the edges. "Why do you care so much what card I summon?" I asked, unsure if I really wanted to know or was just stalling in my denial.

“Why do *you* care so much about what card you summon?” She turned the question on me unerringly.

Slowly, I got to my feet, shivering in the dimming light and breeze. Movement near my left shoulder caught my eye, and when I looked around, I saw that the Baron Kriminel was pressing some kind of switch on the fountain.

The lamp posts around the patio slowly came on, their glows almost as orange as the fire that still flickered in the pit.

At least now I could see. And I could feel warmth resonating from red coils on the lamps. Still, I wasn’t willing to believe he’d done it for my benefit.

Baron Kriminel offered me a wry grin, and leaned against the railing with Marinette Bras Cheche once more.

“I don’t have to perform magic tricks at your whim,” I said slowly. “Especially since you still won’t tell me what you want.”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “You don’t have to do anything I ask of you. You can continue as you are now, and perhaps the next time you summon the Moon, the wolves will kill someone you care about instead of an old woman who deserved it. All the while, you will be able to do nothing but beg it to stop.” While her tone never changed, her words were frank and… scary.

I was *terrified* that she was right.

I didn’t know what to say. I looked down at the white stone, eyes on my shoes. “Then why ask me to summon it, if you already *know*?”

“Because there is only so much I can know without seeing it for myself.”

“If my control over the Moon is as bad as you say, what’s to stop it from killing you? *Any* of you?” I asked carefully. I hadn’t meant it as a threat, but I seriously didn’t know just how well I could control the Moon if I summoned it here. Especially with how on edge I felt around the Loa.

A low chuckle ran through the group. As if I’d made a joke that was universally amusing.

“If your little spell can kill any of us, then we do not deserve to be here, *cher,*” Baron Kriminel informed me.

“Fine,” I mumbled, letting the Chariot and the Devil dissolve before focusing on the Moon. Like this morning and the night in the cemetery, the

magic leapt too easily to my reaching grasp. It was just too eager, and it gave me pause.

But they'd *asked* for it.

I pushed my magic into the card until it disappeared in a shower of sparks. As they had this morning, the sparks grew into the shape of a ghostly wolf.

Unlike this morning, the wolf did not stand and stare at me.

It whirled on Baron Kriminel and advanced, half-transparent fangs bared.

"No!" I cast my power towards the wolf, but it simply shrugged off the power.

When I tried again, with the intent of splitting the magic into small pieces and casting it away, a second wolf appeared on the patio, this one on the low table in front of Maman Brigitte and Baron Samedi.

It growled just as loudly as the first, face a mask of aggression.

"Stop it!" I tried again, twisting and pulling at the magic. Like before, when they'd killed Colette, nothing I did seemed to have any effect.

Maman Brigitte stared into the face of the closest wolf, eyebrows drawn together as if she could see more than just the Form itself.

"Even if you were not so afraid, I think this summoning would have gone poorly," she remarked at last. "You just don't understand the card, do you? No…" She reached out and the wolf snapped at her. Maman Brigitte merely twisted her fingers away.

"Could you decide quickly what you're going to do with them?" Baron Kriminel asked. "I'm not letting it *bite* me."

"Can you not get rid of them?" Now Maman Brigitte looked to me, her face edged with surprise. "I was expecting the lack of control, but the inability to dispel the magic?"

"I…I can sometimes," I said in a small voice. "But I tried, just now, and that's why there are…two."

Marinette barked out a laugh, completely unperturbed at the wolf dangerously close to Kriminel.

"Am I wasting magic on this, or not?" The Baron Kriminel asked again. When I glanced at him, I saw that his questioning gaze was fixed on Maman Brigitte.

"No," she sighed, sitting forward in her seat. When she raised her hand, something rectangular glittered in her fingers, about the size of a–

“What is that?” I breathed, knowing damn well what it was.

Maman Brigitte didn’t answer. She twirled the Arcana in her hand, just as it caught fire and burned up within seconds.

In the time between the card vanishing and the explosion of green flame on the patio, my head *screamed* the big fact of the night at me.

Maman Brigitte was a summoner.

Heat washed over me, rocketing me back to reality as the flames twisted and swelled to form a shape. Fear swelled in my chest, causing my heart to pound, and another wolf appeared beside the first.

Now all of them focused on the greenish-black minotaur that had formed from the dying flames.

Or what my brain *thought* was a minotaur. Green-black skin melded seamlessly into a bone-like face, and a long tongue dripped spit from its too-wide jaws. Both of its hands were gnarled and clawed, and it stood easily six feet tall.

I was absolutely *terrified.* None of my cards had this kind of effect. None of them appeared in such a violent way.

How powerful *was* she?

“No!” I shrieked, throwing a hand out to my wolves when they all leaped onto the minotaur. It snarled, lashing out at them with a backhanded sweep.

I had expected it to knock them back.

I had not expected it to shatter them. A sound like breaking glass met my ears as the wolves vanished, and then I felt it in my magic.

It was as if someone had sucker punched me straight in my soul. *Hard.*

I was driven to my knees with a gasp, my lungs fighting to take in more air.

When I finally looked up again, mind cold with terror, I found that the creature was gone and Maman Brigitte had risen to her feet.

“Do you know why it did that?” She asked very patiently as she closed the scant distance between us. Her black dress whispered against the stone, and I could only shake my head as my limbs shook.

“It reacted to your fear. The others trust you to protect yourself, but not the Moon. Any other card you obtain will be hit or miss in this way as well, once they come to know you.”

“But they’re just cards,” I breathed. “My mom taught me that…the cards are just vessels to be filled with magic.”

“Your mother taught you a common misunderstanding. There are so few of us, and fewer still with arcana, so most do not care to right the lie.” She let out a long sigh. “Though you are the first I’ve met that hasn’t realized it sooner.”

“How do I make them *stop*?” I asked, getting to my feet finally. “I can’t have them summoning themselves and killing people.”

“You can’t,” she agreed, suddenly shrewd.

I didn’t like it.

“I can help you,” the Loa went on. “But there will be a catch.”

Caught off guard, I stared at her for a second before shaking my head frantically. “No, no catch. No more favors. If I’ve learned one thing this month, it’s that.”

“It’s not a *big* catch,” Baron Samedi put in. “We don’t even have to call it that. How about…quid pro quo. You help us, we help you.”

“Help…you?” I repeated. “You’re the *Loa*, aren’t you? Why in the world do you need *my* help?”

“Yes, I agree,” Baron Kriminel intoned. “Why *do* we need her help, again? Especially after that underwhelming performance.”

“Because when I asked, you expressed disdain at spending your days in the city among mortals,” Maman Brigitte pointed out. “But please, Kriminel. Do let me know if that has changed?” She raised her eyebrows in question.

He smiled at her, but it was not friendly. “It has not. In reflection, please. By all means. Ask the *witch* instead of one of *our* followers.”

“Ask the witch for *what*?” I broke in. “Because there’s a big list of things she is *not* going to do, no matter what kind of help you’re offering.”

The last rays of sunlight faded, leaving us only in lamplight and the glow from the fire.

It made the Loa seem eerie.

Turning to glare at Baron Kriminel, I was startled to see that in the flickering light, he looked almost skeletal. As if his bones were painted against his dark skin.

But then the light wavered, and the strange look to him was gone.

His grin widened.

“Here.” Maman Brigitte reached out, her hand around something that hadn’t been there a moment ago. Her fingers uncurled and I was able to look at the object, only to be taken aback.

“Is that a jaw bone?” I asked, reaching out very carefully and picking up the shiny, black *jaw*. Maybe a skunk, or some other small creature? It was small, barely as long as my hand, and a chain was looped through a small hole in the bone. The exterior was cold and smooth, like it had been dipped in something. “Why, umm, are you giving me a jawbone?”

“It is a little bit of magic I worked for you. I’d thought originally it was too strong, but after seeing your summoning, I am sure it is not,” Maman Brigitte mused. “When you wear it, should you summon any of your cards and they go out of control, it will end the spell and send the Form away.”

“So, what happened with the wolves won’t happen anymore?” I clarified.

“That *is* the idea. I hope you won’t need it long, but the magic won’t run out.”

I started to put it on, then paused. “This isn’t a trick, right? This won’t *hurt* or anything?”

“I have no need to trick you.”

That seemed like the best answer I was going to get. Still, I hesitated a moment longer, wavering between putting it on and returning the gift. Especially since I didn’t know what she wanted from me in return.

But the possibility of my summoning hurting someone I cared about terrified me.

Steeling myself, I lifted the chain over my head and let the jawbone rest against my chest.

A warm tingle went through me, but nothing more.

I let out the air I was holding in relief.

“There are voodoo practitioners dying in New Orleans,” Maman Brigitte said when I visibly relaxed. She sat back down on the sofa and folded one knee over the other.

“Why?” I asked, still examining the jaw.

“We do not know. That’s what I’m asking of you. Find out who is killing our followers, and stop them.”

Startled, I looked up at her with wide eyes. “*Stop* them? You mean *kill* them?”

“I mean stop them. Or let us have them. I care very little which.” She looked to Baron Samedi, who shrugged. Was there something going on between them that I couldn’t see? “We could help you stop them if it came to that,” she said at last. “Do we have a deal?”

That didn’t sound so terrible. Find bad people, stop bad people, let the Loa take care of said bad people. Surely all I had to do was watch my back and be discreet.

I opened my mouth to speak but didn’t get the chance.

“That had better not be a ‘*yes ma’am’* about to come out of your mouth, George,” a dry voice drawled from somewhere at my back.

I turned, not needing to see the person’s face to know who it was.

Merric stood on the lip of the fountain, all nine tails at his back like a very glorious bustle and his eyes shining yellow.

A sneer played at his lips. “Because I’m sure I’ve taught you better than that.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

"Merric," I breathed, unable to believe he was *here* of all places. "What are you doing here?"

He rolled his eyes in my direction and hopped off of the fountain. "You're making everyone *upset* again," he informed me. "Your cousin says she came home to find you were gone, your car was unlocked, and there were signs of very poignant magic in the yard. So she called *everyone*, and now it's just a mess." His eyes went unflinchingly to Baron Samedi's face. "Your magic reeks just as badly as it always has."

His tone of voice never changed. Merric's words and attitude were as scathing as when he spoke to me. Wasn't he afraid of the *Loa*?

More frighteningly, a thought occurred to me. Who was Merric, that he *didn't* fear them?

Baron Samedi sighed and got to his feet. "Seems like no matter what I do, I just can't keep you out of here, can I?" He asked almost kindly. "Don't you know where you aren't wanted?"

That made it sound like the Loa *knew* Merric. And what reason did a kitsune have to know *them?*

Turning back to me, Merric ran a hand through his dark hair, tousling it further. "Ask her to clarify," he ordered.

"What?" I didn't understand.

He rolled his eyes, not bothering to hide one bit of his true appearance. "Ask *her*-" he jabbed a finger towards Maman Brigitte, who graced him with a small frown. "To *clarify* the bit about helping you stop their murderer."

“O…kay…” I looked to Maman Brigitte. “Clarify it? I guess?” I didn’t understand what the big deal was.

“There’s very little to clarify. It’s nothing for you to have appeared here over,” the Loa shrugged.

“*Mortals* might think differently,” Merric shot back. “If you won’t tell her, I will.”

The list of things I didn’t understand was growing, and it did not make me happy.

“Were one of us to help you enact our vengeance on a murderer, we would do it *from* you,” Maman Brigitte explained slowly. “That’s all.”

I didn’t get it.

Merric sighed heavily. “She’s going to *possess you*, George. You know. Wear your body like an emo ensemble and do what she wants with it. You open yourself to possession once, you get possessed *all the time.”*

“You were going to *possess* me?” I asked in alarm.

“It was just an extreme measure, as you don’t seem to enjoy finishing things,” she explained. “Your fox is being dramatic.”

“*Her fox* is here to bring her home,” Merric interrupted.

Maman Brigitte turned on him, and the air went cold. “Watch yourself,” she said softly. “You are not so powerful here as you might think.”

“And you are not so powerful any *longer* as you might think,” he replied just as softly.

Then, like he’d flipped a switch, the threatening air around the kitsune was gone. Nine tails became two that waved at his back, and his eyes faded to brown. “I didn’t come to fight, Brigitte,” he said, a happy-go-lucky grin on his face.

“I wish you hadn’t come at all,” Baron Kriminel said, pushing off of his spot on the rail.

Maman Brigitte lifted a hand, and he paused. “We were done here, anyway,” she shrugged. “Tell me that you will look for whoever is killing voodoo practitioners, and you can keep the necklace. We would prefer that you take care of them, as well.” She looked at Merric. “Is that sufficient, little fox?”

“You don’t have to rush,” Merric assured her. “I thought maybe we could talk a little before I go? That Spring Equinox, huh?” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“I’m killing him,” Marinette announced, stepping forward. “Or I’ll burn down this entire island. Whichever works.” She lifted her hands at her sides to waist height, and fire licked at her palms.

“Holy *shit*,” I leaped sideways into Merric. “Yes, yes, I give you my word I’ll look!” I told Maman Brigitte while trying to get away from Marinette’s flames. “How do I call you?”

“Call any of our names,” Baron Samedi explained. “With a little bit of your magic in the words.” He didn’t look at all bothered at Marinette’s growing flames.

“And how do we *leave?”* I demanded, now putting Merric between myself and the danger.

“Oh, you’re actually ready? Are you sure?” Merric turned to face me, his smile much too wide. “After all, why not *waste my night* further, George? I’ve only gone to the ends of the earth for you now, and saved you from Loa possession. You *sure* you’re ready to go?”

“Yes! I’m–“

“Sure I shouldn’t have this *fire fight* with a god first, *George?”*

“*I’m ready to go!”* I yelled, eyes on the flaming figure.

“Well, if you’re sure…” He grabbed my hand and tugged.

It wasn’t at all similar to traveling with Baron Samedi. One moment we were at the home of the Loa, and the next, we were standing on the riverbank.

Sounds lit the air around us. A band played, and crowds had gathered for street magic acts and freshly fried foods that made the air smell sickly sweet.

We were back in New Orleans. My hands shook at my sides as I turned in a circle to look around me. How had he gotten us here?

And why was it *night?*

“How did you do that?” I asked, marveling. “No spells like that exist. And Baron Samedi said–“

“I don’t operate by witch magic rules.” He dropped my hand, speaking as if I should’ve known his own magical proficiency far exceeded my own.

“Where are we?” I didn’t recognize the exact street, and we could be anywhere along the riverbank with it at our backs.

“That’s a weird way to say *thank you*.”

“*Thank* you,” I amended. “For coming to get me and keeping me from agreeing to her terms blindly.”

“Hmmm.” He reached out, and I nearly stepped back in surprise. He wasn’t exactly the most predictable of people. But Merric only lifted the jawbone at my throat. “Too bad I didn’t stop you from putting this on, too.”

“Is it dangerous? Should I take it off?” Already my hands were halfway to the chain.

“No….maybe.” He dropped his hand. “If she said it’ll help, then keep it on. She doesn’t *lie*, exactly. But don’t be surprised if it starts acting in ways apart from what’s intended. Their magic does things like that.” He started to turn, but I reached out and gripped his wrist.

Merric stopped, his eyes going very pointedly from my hand, to my arm, and finally my face. The brown had been replaced with yellow, and he was no longer smiling.

“Thank you,” I said again. “I really appreciate what you did. Do I…” I swallowed around my impending words. “I feel like maybe I owe you something.” I felt a bit guilty at my thoughts from this morning, when I’d worried about him showing up in my house. He’d *saved me*, and he didn’t have to.

Now his lips twitched at the beginning of a smile. “Oh, George,” he sighed. “You’re so set on getting yourself in trouble tonight, aren’t you?”

“I’m set on paying you back for your help,” I agreed. “Because I know you didn’t have to, and I feel like you put yourself in danger by being… wherever we were.”

“It’s an island,” he explained. “But it’s not *quite* in our world, so very few people can find it.”

“You found it.”

“How observant of you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you going to take me up on this, or what? My gratitude is fading fast.”

“Well, you already owe me two earth-shattering, life-ending favors,” Merric pointed out, dramatically pondering my question with a finger tapping his lips. “I just don’t know what else I could *possibly* want.”

“You could want dinner?” I offered. “Because I’m actually a lot hungrier than I thought I was five minutes ago when you were about to get turned into a scorch mark.”

While it hadn’t seemed like I’d been gone that long, my body disagreed as my stomach tried to turn itself into knots to prove how much I needed to eat.

“Why, George, are you asking me on a date?”

“No.”

“What will *Cian* think?”

“It’s not a date.” Merric and I were *not* dating, under any circumstance. If not for my own unwillingness to do so, then definitely because he wasn’t exactly subtle in his dislike of me.

“Are you buying?” The fox inquired.

“Sure.”

“Then I shall keep my choices *cheap*.” It was amazing how he could turn anything into an insult. “Hmmm.” The fox turned to look at the street behind us. “Come on.”

Without further preamble, he led me off the riverwalk and to the street proper. Cafés lined this side of the road, and he marched us straight to the emptiest looking one.

Even it was packed. But Merric didn’t mind. He breezed past the waitress with a hapless grin and made his way to the cases on the far side where meals were displayed in cold cases wrapped in plastic or in closed containers.

“Am I buying you food to take home?” I asked, not really surprised.

His ears twitched in my direction. “No, George. We’ll eat somewhere else.” He grabbed two plastic containers and a bottle of water, then gestured for me to look as well.

I needed more time than him. Looking at the different meals, I finally chose an egg salad sandwich for myself, along with a plastic bowl of mixed fruit and a cookie. Snagging a water, I followed Merric to the counter, where the man there was ringing up his food.

“You together?” he asked, and Merric nodded.

“I’m so happy you’re making the ham and brie again!” The kitsune gushed enthusiastically.

The man smiled. “I try to put a few out when I think you’ll be here.”

Merric *beamed.*

It was unnerving.

“Just put it all on my tab, okay?” The kitsune asked, making me pause.

“What? I told you I’d pay,” I protested, but the man was already bagging up our food and handing it over to the fox.

“Oh, I was just joking,” Merric laughed sweetly. He threw an arm over my shoulders and looked at the man again. “Have a good night!”

“You too, Merric. Both of you come back soon.” He turned to help with another order, and Merric’s arm slid off my shoulders and to my wrist. He tugged me out of the shop, his smile melted away by the time we’d found the doorway.

“Why do you do that?” I asked, more curious than anything, as I followed him back to the riverwalk and down the sidewalk. As we walked along the banks of the black river, the sounds of the crowd quieted and mixed with the band.

Merric kept walking and didn’t answer.

Finally, he stopped and turned to look at me under the paltry light of the nearest streetlamp. “You should check your phone,” he said before sinking to the ground. “I’m sure all those lovers of yours are blowing it up.”

He sank to the grass, legs crossed under him.

Sighing, I pulled my phone from my back pocket. I wouldn’t say so, but I was glad he’d reminded me. I’d honestly not thought to look at my phone.

To me, I’d only been gone an hour at best. My mind was still catching up.

Yet my phone said it was nearly ten pm. *Ten hours* past the time I’d gotten home from lunch with Yuna.

I had forty-seven messages and twenty-two calls. In the group chat, I scrolled to the bottom and typed in simply, *I’m fine and home. Sorry for worrying you. Tired, we’ll talk tomorrow?* Then sent a similar message to Aveline. She was working tonight, and I wouldn’t see her until she came home.

I waited to make sure that everyone was agreeable to that, then shoved my phone back into my pocket.

Looking up, I saw there were more lights than I remembered.

Small, flickering balls of white fire danced in the air around Merric. One hovered over the food he’d laid in the grass, while the other two spun lazily over his head.

“Oh, wow,” I breathed, sitting in front of him and reaching out towards the closest fire.

“It might be hot,” Merric warned, mouth full of ham sandwich.

I paused, but met his gaze anyway. “Will you burn me?”

“I burn everyone. Didn’t Cian tell you that?”

“I didn’t ask.” My heart fluttered, but I reached out again. Maybe he really would burn me with the flames, but I needed to *know.*

The fire didn’t burn at all. It was warm, and the pearly flames made my fingers tingle with the feel of magic, but they didn’t burn.

“I tried texting you after…Colette,” I told him, cupping my hand under the flame for the effect of looking like I was holding it.

Merric watched, and suddenly the flame grew larger until it filled my palm. I couldn’t help but grin at the picture it made.

Still, it didn’t burn. It was merely warm against my skin, no matter that it had become larger.

“Don’t know why,” he said. “You had what you wanted.”

My hand fell, and I looked at him, confused. “Had what I wanted?”

“My help. I would think you were *glad* not to hear from me.”

His white tails moved to curl around us, the fur soft against my bare arms when it touched me. “Then you’re wrong,” I said slowly. “I’d thought you’d stick around.”

Merric took a huge bite of his sandwich. “Why?” The kitsune mumbled around his mouthful.

Instead of answering, I opened the container of fruit and popped a grape into my mouth. It gave me time to think, since I wasn’t willing to talk with my mouth full like him.

“Because, I don’t know…” I shrugged my shoulders. “Aren’t we…” I didn’t want to say the word. He’d laugh.

A smile still spread over his lips. “Inari’s ass, you are *not* about to use the ‘f’ word, are you?”

I took a bite of my sandwich.

“You *were*. You think we’re *friends*.” He cackled, making my shoulders fall at his words. “You don’t want to be friends with a kitsune.”

“Why? Because the kitsune doesn’t want to be friends with *me?”*

“You’re working too hard at this. It isn’t going to win you a badge to not say ‘fuck off, fox.’ No one will be impressed by your diligence here.”

“Clearly,” I mumbled, shifting my legs under me as one of his little fires zipped around my face.

“So stop trying to be Mother Teresa and breathe the obvious sigh of relief you’re feeling that I haven’t come knocking.”

“No.” I looked up at him to meet his gaze challengingly.

“No?”

“Did I stutter?” When he didn’t answer, I continued. “I’m not *relieved* you haven’t come to my door. I’m not *dreading* the favors I owe you. I

consider you my friend, whether you like it or not. You've helped me more than I could ever possibly repay, for one, and I would never forget that."

"We are not going to trauma bond."

"If we were going to trauma bond, we would've done it already," I pointed out, tearing off a bite of my sandwich and wishing I'd gotten beef. I ran my tongue over my teeth again at the prickling sensation that crawled down my spine.

Still completely flat-and-fine.

"So…" He stuffed the rest of his sandwich in his mouth. I looked up, mildly impressed at the monumental effort he exhibited in chewing and swallowing nearly half of the whole thing.

"So what?" I said at last. "If this was you trying to get me to admit I don't like you, then you get an F for execution." I hesitated, then went on. "Though…I do worry sometimes that when you show up, you do it just to be a bull in a china shop. And I don't want to be the china one day."

"How hurtful."

"If you do not want to be my friend because of your own reasons, that is on you." I pointed a strawberry at him.

He took it and promptly ate it.

"But you don't get to cop out of the responsibility by saying it's me who won't commit." When he looked down at my cup of fruit, I drew it towards myself protectively.

"Who says I'm copping out?" Merric laughed. "I'm trying to do you a favor."

"Copping out," I repeated.

"Is that so?"

"If you don't like my company, please feel free to say so." My stomach did a little flip in preparation for him to do just that. It was pretty obvious he didn't like me. He wasn't subtle, but it'd still hurt to hear.

"I'm not really sure how I feel about your company," Merric replied after a good bit of contemplation. "Since it's normally bundled with *their* company."

I considered reminding him *they* had names, but let it go.

"Oh, I suppose I just can't deny you," he gave me his best wide grin, though it didn't sit right on his true face. Like his lips weren't meant to stretch that far.

“You’re also not willing to try very hard for me,” I observed when I saw that his smile never came close to reaching his eyes. “Come on, Merric. Give me the cute, orange ears that twitch a lot and those warm brown eyes.”

His not-so-warm and not-so-brown eyes narrowed. The smile fell slightly. “Don’t get smart now, George,” Merric warned. “The harder you try to outmaneuver a fox, the harder you hit your face on the cold, cold cement.”

“Is that you saying you don’t want to be friends?”

“That’s me saying I’ll be over soon for *bonding* time. Maybe you can even read my fortune and make cookies. I’ll sleep over, and we can gossip about *boys*.”

“And girls,” I reminded him.

“My bad. Girls too. But only the beautiful-sharp-fanged ones and the obliviously naive ones.”

“Why, Merric.” I put a hand to my chest and batted my lashes at him. “I had no idea that you think I’m beautiful.”

His reply was to smirk and triumphantly lift my partial cup of fruit that I hadn’t even noticed was missing.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

Being that it was impossible to *move* Zahir without his blessing, I found that the fennec fox made my job much harder than it had to be.

Marin had assured me that all I needed to do was show him I meant business, and to 'tell him to move like I meant it.'

So far, I hadn't figured out just what that meant.

In fact, it seemed like my fox-communication skills were bad all over the board.

Especially since it had been two days since our picnic, and I hadn't heard anything from him since.

At nearly two am on a Sunday, Marin's shop, L*e Renard Qui Rit*, was deserted. The influx of customers on Sundays, the shop owner and witch had told me, came in the early afternoon. Not this late.

When I'd asked her why she kept it open so late, she reminded me that *I* had come in for the first time around one in the morning, and left it at that.

Now that I'd finished reorganizing a shelf and putting out new charms she'd made, I had nothing else to do and thirty minutes still left on my shift.

Marin herself was at the front counter and had finished her own work only a few minutes ago. Over her, the faerie lights that hung from branches on the ceiling twinkled. The shop, no longer benefitting from the light of day, looked like some hidden magical place.

It fit perfectly.

As of yet, I hadn't had a chance to talk to anyone about the Loa. Our differing work schedules made seeing Aveline during the days I worked

impossible, and the Troublesome Trio had been busy with issues of their own concerning vampires.

I'd debated all evening on whether or not to tell Marin. She'd never seemed too supportive of my decisions, and always valued caution over action, but she was also someone I considered reliable and a friend.

"I finished with the last display," I told her, approaching the counter.

"You can leave early if you want," Marin offered, looking up from her small book to meet my gaze.

"Actually, I was wondering if we could talk," I admitted, feeling my stomach turn in response to my nerves.

She didn't answer immediately, and the drumming of my fingers on the counter became almost overwhelming.

I stopped.

"Of course we can," Marin assured me, setting the book down and running a hand over the sleeping fennec fox beside the register.

Not for the first time, I wondered what he was. Could he *really* be just a fox?

I started to speak, then hesitated. How in the world was I supposed to say what had happened?

"So yesterday afternoon, Baron Samedi showed up in my yard and teleported me to Loa Island," I said without preamble.

Marin blinked. She laid the book down by Zahir, then smoothed a wrinkle out of her shirt. "But this is not the part that troubles you?" she assumed.

"Well, frankly it *does* trouble me. I didn't know the Loa were even real. But I'm working on prioritizing the important things. Maman Brigitte asked me to look into the deaths of voodoo practitioners in the city, only I don't know anything about it." I paused, then continued. "She gave me this."

Pulling the necklace from under my shirt, I held it up for Marin's inspection.

"Is it dangerous?" I asked worriedly when she drew back.

"No. It's just *Loa*," she replied as if that was any kind of real explanation. "Why did the Loa ask you to look into their affairs?"

"No idea," I stated.

"And you accepted?"

"I did."

“Hmmm.” She busied herself by tapping a finger on the register. “Have you told anyone else about this? Any in your circle?”

I anxiously wrapped the hem of my shirt around my finger. “I told one of my friends,” I said finally. “He, uh, was there for part of it.”

Her brows rose. “The vampire?”

“No.”

“Your cousin?”

“…No.”

“I’m not going to play twenty questions all night.”

“That’s fair. My kitsune came and got me out.”

“George, I thought I warned you about him.” Marin let out a long, disappointed sigh. “Kitsune–“

“I know what they are,” I interrupted. “I know what *he* is.” He was probably listening to our conversation, with my luck. “I really appreciate any advice you give me, but I make my own choices in who I choose as a friend.”

“I think you will come to regret it,” Marin offered.

“Then that’s what the Goddess has decided for me. But I won’t cast him out because of any preconceived notions.” I wouldn’t tell her just how he acted or his two-faced personality.

“Then what would you like my help with? If it’s not to help you escape the eye of the Loa or warn you off foxes?” Marin prompted.

“The voodoo killings,” I repeated. “I want to help the Loa, since they’re helping me, but I don’t know where to start.”

“Nathaniel,” Marin shrugged simply.

I blinked at her, nonplussed.

“Nathaniel,” my boss repeated, pointed towards the front door.

Oh. Of course. Nathaniel, who owned the voodoo shop across the street.

I’d forgotten about him.

“I don’t see any reason not to ask him,” she went on. “The worst he can do is not help you, and that won’t hurt you any.”

“True,” I agreed, scrubbing my palms on my jeans as they itched at the thought of all the voodoo magic permeating his shop. I had no problem with that kind of magic at all, but it made me itchy.

“Go see him now,” Marin encouraged. “We’re done for the night anyway, and I’m sure he’s wrapping up as well.”

I glanced back. “Are you sure?”

“More than. I’ll see you on Sunday?”

“Yeah-wait.” I had started to walk, but came to a dead stop as I remembered. Sunday was still two days off, but the week *after* was the problem. “Sunday’s fine, but I can’t work any shifts until late next week,” I admitted awkwardly.

“You won’t be working any at all next week apart from Sunday,” Marin replied. Before I could think to worry, she explained. “I factored in for the full moon already. There’s a gala on Friday that I’ve been asked to attend. I’ll have the shop closed from Wednesday until Monday.”

It surprised me that she’d thought about my full-moon-moods. But was it really a surprise, given all the things she *did* know? And it wasn’t a secret from her that I was a hybrid.

“Gala?” I asked, briefly sidetracked.

“Just something I can’t turn down.”

“It sounds really fancy.”

Marin sighed. “Yes, I suppose it will be. Goodnight, George. And good luck with Nathaniel.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you Sunday.” She waved me off, and I let the door close lightly behind me.

The Voodoo shop, called *Teresa’s*, had an exterior of worn brick and painted glass doors. I tugged on one, the scent of magic and candles hitting me hard in the face and promising to stick in my nostrils for days.

As it had been the first time I’d entered, the shop was very dimly lit. Sconces against the walls cast unsteady light, and the sound of a well-worn rocking chair moving on the floor met my ears.

There was no one at the counter, and when I glanced around I still didn’t see anybody. Was I too late? Was he closing up already and I’d just have to come back another time?

“Hello?” I called, only slightly louder than my normal voice. “Nathaniel?”

“Looks like you’re lost again, *cher*,” a soft voice replied as footsteps preceded the arrival of the tall, dark-skinned man who owned the shop. I estimated him to be in his mid-thirties, if he was human, but I wasn’t too sure on the logistics of aging when it came to those who practiced voodoo.

“Not quite,” I said, offering him a small smile. “I hope I’m not bothering you? I can leave.”

“Not bothering me at all. Was just about to lock the doors.” He rested his arms on the counter and leaned towards me. “What can I help you with…?”

“George,” I introduced.

“Nathaniel. You’re the witch that’s workin’ for Miss Marin. She need something?”

“No, it’s not that.” I sucked in a breath of cloyingly sweet air, unsure of how to say what I needed to. For a moment I busied myself trying to identify what I smelled. Some of it was familiar, like the lavender and the cinnamon. But other scents were not. “I know how this is going to sound,” I explained slowly. “But I promise, I’m not lying.”

The rocking from the depths of the room stopped.

“The Loa asked me to help look for someone who’s killing voodoo practitioners,” I said quickly. “I gave Maman Brigitte my word that I would, and that’s why I’m here. I’m just not sure where to start, other than right *here*, since I know nothing about it. I was…hoping you’d help me.”

Nathaniel stared at me, unmoving.

“You expect me to believe that you, a *witch* met with the *Loa*?”

I hated his tone. Why couldn’t he just take me at my word?

“I can try to prove it?” I offered, pulling the jawbone free from my shirt again. Nothing about it screamed *Loa* to me, but perhaps he would see it differently.

His eyes landed on it, and he looked back over his shoulder, lips thinning to a flat line.

Shuffling steps caught my attention and pulled my gaze to the dark depths of the shop. A short figure emerged, showing itself to be Nathaniel’s mother, who I’d met briefly before.

She approached me slowly, relying heavily on a cane with a small bird skull topper that she gripped in one gnarled hand.

Her other hand, just as gnarled, reached out for me. Feeling nervous, I locked my knees so I wouldn’t step away inadvertently.

Instead, I stepped forward, offering her the jawbone at my neck.

The woman ran her fingers over it thoroughly, exploring the blackened bone. Finally, she let go and stepped away.

“It’s the real deal,“ she informed her son, her milky brown eyes finding his. “Not a forgery or an imitation. The magic is very strong, and I’ve felt *her* power before enough to know it now.”

By *her*, did she mean one of the Loa?

Nathaniel heaved a sigh and came around the side of the register. “Let me lock up,” he said quietly. “There’s a kitchen down that hallway.” He gestured to the darker parts of the shop. “Why don’t you walk my mother back to the table, and I’ll meet you there.”

Without any input from me, his mother latched herself onto my arm in a grip like iron. How was she so *strong* for someone so frail-looking?

“My name is Teresa,” the old woman introduced. “This shop was originally my grandmother’s, and will continue to be passed down as long as I can help it.”

“I’m George,” I replied. “It’s a very…interesting shop,” I remarked, unable to settle on any other word to describe it. Most of this stuff was unrecognizable to me, and smelled very strong to my sensitive nose.

She cackled, gesturing to an altar that I recognized very little about. “We’re one of the few places to have such altars where the tourists and the *witches* can come and stare. I am also one of the few true *Mambo* still living who studied with Maman Brigitte herself.”

“A-what? “ I asked, both awed and confused.

“A female practitioner. My son is considered a *Houngan.”*

“I thought voodoo practitioners were called *Bokor*?”

Teresa sniffed disdainfully. “Perhaps by you.” It wasn’t quite an answer, but I didn’t push her. She swept aside a checkered half curtain, allowing us entry into a small kitchen with two black pots simmering on an ancient stove. The refrigerator hummed obnoxiously, and the rest of the floor was taken up by a round table covered with the same cloth as the curtains.

“Sit, sit,” she ushered me towards the table, releasing my arm as she did, and I slid into one of the well-worn chairs. It was more comfortable than I’d expected.

I rubbed my arm as I sat, surprised at how strong the old woman’s grip had been.

Teresa sat as well, and a moment later Nathaniel breezed into the room. He dragged a chair around, sitting in it backward and tipping it forward so the back rested on the table and only two legs made contact with the floor.

“Maman Brigitte told you about the deaths of other practitioners?” Nathaniel clarified.

“She did. And asked me to look into it.”

“Did you…” He closed his eyes. “No. I’m sorry, it’s not the time to sate my curiosity. Do you know *anything* about them?” My eyes narrowed at the change of subject, and I couldn’t help but wonder what he’d wanted to ask of me.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t. I’m still new here, and I just know what I catch on the news.”

“It hasn’t been on the news,” he dismissed. “We’ve kept it secret.” Nathaniel hesitated, looking torn. Like he wasn’t sure how much to tell me or how much to purposefully leave out. “I don’t know that much. Only the names of those killed, and the families they were from.”

“How many people have died so far?” I asked, looking for any kind of substantial detail.

“Seven.”

“That’s so many!” My hands gripped the table. Surely the other practitioners were out trying to hunt their killer. “*How* were they killed?”

“In rituals.” He said it slowly, as if he didn’t *want* to admit the details to a witch. “In *Voodoo* rituals. I’ve only seen pictures of where they were found, and no one can piece together just what these rituals are. It seems like the work of a *Bokor*, yet it’s too refined for that.”

I turned to glare at Teresa, twisting my fingers in the hem of my shirt. “You told me voodoo practitioners *aren’t* called that.”

“A *Bokor* is the popular name for us in some circles,” Teresa shrugged. “But to us, it means a practitioner who barely follows our laws or respects our traditions. A *Bokor* uses his magic to hurt, not heal.”

“But from what I’ve seen, that isn’t what our killer is,” Nathaniel interjected. “I’ve seen a *Bokor’s* work before. This isn’t it.”

“Do you know anything else?” I asked. “Is there any way for me to see the ritual remains for myself?”

Both of them were shaking their heads before I’d finished.

“They’ve been purified. It was too dangerous to allow that magic to exist,” Teresa said.

Unfortunately, it was looking like I’d have to wait around for someone else to die. I didn’t like that, and frowned.

Nathaniel caught my look and mirrored it. “I don’t want to wait around either,” he admitted. “I’ve been searching on my own, but I haven’t been able to find anything. No offense, but I don’t understand why the Loa would send a *witch* to help us.”

“Maybe because I’m *not* so close to you,” I suggested. “I can step back and look from the outside in, whereas you might not be able to. Whatever the case, I intend to give this my all, I promise.”

“Why don’t you take her to Johanna’s tomorrow,” Teresa said suddenly.

“What?” Nathaniel whipped his head around. “I really don’t think–“

“Perhaps she’s right,” Teresa went on. “Maman Brigitte had to have a good reason for asking her to help us. I dare not question a Loa, and her least of all. Take her.”

“Johanna’s?” I repeated in question.

“The mother of the latest victim,” Nathaniel said. His frown grew. “Johanna will not like her there,” he pointed out. The words made my stomach clench slightly in anxiety. Getting ridiculed by a voodoo priestess was not on my to-do list.

“Johanna is reasonable. Take her, and that’s final.” Teresa looked back at me. “Perhaps you will see something we do not.”

“I’m stopping by tomorrow night, around midnight,” Nathaniel said. “Meet me here by eleven-thirty and I will take you, if you are so willing to go.”

“I am,” I promised again, hoping they didn’t hear the way my voice was quieter than I’d intended. I cleared my throat to cover it. “Thank you,” I said to both of them as I got to my feet. “I hope I can help, I really do.”

“As do we,” Teresa said. “We do not take it lightly that you are so willing to look into this. Nor should you take it lightly that we are allowing a *witch* into our affairs.” Her milky eyes held mine unnervingly.

“I would never betray your secrets,”

“We’ll see,” he shrugged, getting to his feet. “Come on. I’ll let you out the back.”

Before we’d spoken, I’d had half a notion to go investigating tonight. This late on a Sunday, the crowds were negligible and easily maneuvered around.

But where would I even start to look? What was I looking *for?* I barely knew Voodoo by its smell, and certainly, I knew nothing about it by sight. As of now, this seemed like an impossible puzzle that I hadn’t been given all the pieces for.

I’d have to wait until our visit to Johanna, and figure out what to do afterward. Hopefully, seeing her with Nathaniel would yield some answers.

Before that, I’d go see the Troublesome Trio. Both to fill them in, and because I missed them.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

I hesitated, worrying my lip between my teeth as I stared at the tarot cards in front of me that had been split into three smaller decks. It wasn't *usually* this hard to focus on a reading.

My mind had been chaotic while I'd been shuffling and dividing, which wouldn't help me in a true reading. It was focus time, I told myself as I shook out my shoulders to ease the tension.

What will help me? I turned over the top card of the first deck, resting the large, slick card face up on top of its fellows.

The Queen of Wands starred impassively up at me. She was cLoaked in cloth-of-gold that shimmered, and her hand rested on the head of a large, black cat.

Courage. Determination. Independence. But wasn't that the easy answer? Surely those helped everyone in most situations.

I wasn't convinced I'd done such a good job focusing on the questions for the three-card spread. Summoner I might be, I couldn't just throw my deck around with reckless abandon and expect it to create a breadcrumb trail to a prosperous future.

Which, admittedly, made a damned amusing image in my head.

What will hinder me? I flipped the second card quickly and set it back down on the mini deck.

It was the Moon.

I'd never felt so insulted by a card in my life, frankly. The jawbone seemed to tingle against my throat, and I couldn't help but reach up to run my fingers along it.

When it wasn’t trying to say something about my current lack of control, the moon represented illusion, fear, and intuition. Currently, I couldn’t make up my mind on whether my magic was being cheeky, or this really was the reading.

What is my unrealized potential? Apart from insulting myself with my magic, of course. I flipped the last card over with a brush of magic instead of my hand.

The Three of Pentacles sat there, its two figures working in harmony under the stained glass window that held the pentacles themselves. Upright, the card signified teamwork, learning, and collaboration. A pretty obvious strength, in my opinion.

My Three of Pentacles was upside down.

In this orientation, the card stood for disharmony, misalignment, and working alone.

“I wonder if you’ve misunderstood, my friends,” I sighed, drawing the deck back into my hand and sliding it into its box. “Maybe I’m just too mixed up today to read for myself.”

I didn’t know what other possibility there was. I’d never gotten this combination of cards, for one, and everything seemed so erratic. Perhaps I had gone into the reading with some preconceived notions, a big no-no, but still. If I didn’t know better, I’d think my cards were trying to throw me for a loop.

It was not comforting. Neither was the small, very minute possibility that I wasn’t out of my mind, and my reading had been exactly what it was supposed to be.

I didn’t need any more puzzles in my life right now.

My phone vibrated from the table, but I ignored it in favor of staring out the window over the kitchen sink. From this angle, I could only see part of a neighbor’s roof, but it was enough to hold my attention.

Two white birds hopped along it, dipping and bowing to each other as they moved.

My phone vibrated again, and I snaked a hand out to grab it.

Dragging my absent gaze down to the screen, I couldn’t help the small, half-smile that curled over my lips when I saw Indra’s name on the text.

Are you coming over? Akiva won’t say it, but he’s been debating on calling you to see if you still wanted to.

Yeah, I’ll leave in a minute, I replied. *You want tea?*

I had every intention of stopping by the nearest coffee shop and getting myself very hot and very sweet tea.

Would love it. Just get me whatever you get.

My smile grew just a touch wider. *Warn your dentist.*

PARALLEL PARKING HAD NEVER BEEN MY STRONG SUIT, BUT COMING TO THE Troublesome Trio's house had made getting better at it a necessity.

I eased my SUV along the curb behind some old silver car, squinting at what I hoped was still space between my vehicle and their bumper.

"Goddess, take the wheel," I mumbled, easing up just a touch more and throwing the SUV into park. I hadn't hit anything. Good for me.

When the street was empty, I jumped out of my SUV, both plastic cups in my hands as I jogged across the residential street and up the few stairs that lead me to the trio's porch.

The house was nice, and I'd gotten a few more chances to appreciate the place they'd bought when Cian swept into town and became vampire king in the last few weeks.

With three floors, four bedrooms, and a shower that could fit a small militia, I was sometimes tempted to lie about our own water situation just so I could come over and lock myself in the bedroom with the ensuite Jacuzzi.

Not that I *ever* would, of course.

For the first time, the neighbors were outside at the same moment that I was walking up the stairs. Two elderly ladies sat on the porch to my left, both in rocking chairs.

I smiled. "Good morning." It was barely still morning, at eleven thirty, but it still counted. Besides, I was all but nocturnal anyway. Anything before six pm was morning.

The younger woman beamed at me. "Good morning, dear," she said. "I don't believe I've seen you before."

"Just another of that *parade* those boys have coming and going," the older, thinner woman remarked snidely.

"Parade?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Oh yes!" Now that I'd given her an opening, the woman leaned forward on her rocker with a bright gleam in her eye. She reminded me

uncomfortably of Nathaniel's mother. "At all hours! Day and night. You know what I'm talking about?"

"I do not," I said, hearing movement from inside the house in front of me.

"She's not part of that crowd, clearly," the other woman agreed. "Look at her. Too clean cut. Even with that pink in her hair."

The pink I still needed to touch up or cut out.

I kept the polite smile affixed to my face.

"Well. You do look much nicer than the rest of those *people*," the lady sneered. "You know what *I* think?"

Akiva was on the other side of the door. I could *smell him.* Not to mention to my ears, his snickering was not quite as muffled as he might think.

"What's that?" I asked politely.

"*Whores*," the woman announced, just like that, to anyone that might hear.

I couldn't help it. My mouth fell open slightly, and my mind blanked. "…What?" I was sure I'd heard her wrong.

"Those three in there? *Whores*. I've seen 'em kissin' on each other." The woman nodded sagely. Even her companion nodded along like she was discussing the weather.

"I think they hold *sex parties* here," she went on. "We hear all manner of howling during the night. You'd do well to stay away from them, dear. Wouldn't want them corrupting you over to their bad way of thinking."

Akiva laughed so loudly I was sure the old ladies had heard him.

"I'll try really hard to remember that," I said, unsure of *what else* to respond with. "I hope you both have a lovely morning." I smacked the door so Akiva would let me in.

"You're not going *in*, are you?" The older woman seemed horrified. "I thought you were just one of those delivery drivers."

"No," I sighed as the door *finally* creaked open and Akiva poked his head out to wave jovially at the two women. "Unfortunately, I come here a lot. And go inside. A lot." I gave them my best forlorn expression and allowed Akiva to pull me inside.

"We'll be lucky if they don't call the cops, *ya amar*," Akiva murmured in his rich accent, a wicked grin curving over his full lips.

“Akiva please, without Indra in the room, how will I know how you’re so sweetly insulting me this time?” I huffed, batting my eyelashes at him.

He scoffed. “You could ask me very nicely, and perhaps I might tell you.”

“He wasn’t insulting you today.” Indra breezed into the room, hand held out for his cup that I surrendered gladly. “He was calling you the moon.”

At my sudden look downward and tightened grip on my own cup, ever observant Indra paused. “Is that actually an insult, and I didn’t know?”

“No,” I sighed, pushing Akiva away when he tried to take my other cup. “On second thought, here you go, buddy.” I held it out to the lich, who paused.

“Why? Normally you’re very possessive over your drink,” he asked.

“Can’t I be nice? I’ll share, Akiva. *Really.*”

“Mhmm.” He plucked the cup from my fingers and took a drink.

Immediately his face morphed to a sneer of disgust. The lich thrust the cup back into my hand, still making a face as he swallowed the overly sweetened green tea. “That’s *disgusting,*” he announced. “How much sugar is in that?”

“I thought you liked sugary things. You have enough Lucky Charms in the cabinet to feed the city for a week.”

“Not like *that,*” he shuddered, his hazel-green eyes narrowing. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“It’s not an insult,” I repeated dismissively, taking the moment to really look at Akiva.

Honestly, a*ppreciating* all three of them was one of my favorite activities. Right now, both men were wearing clothes, which was not my preferred amount of dress for them, but I knew what they looked like without. I could suffer for now.

Both of them looked properly equipped to spend all day doing nothing. Indra wore black sweatpants that fit close to his legs and a dark grey t-shirt. Akiva was dressed similarly in dark, loose sweatpants of his own and a red long-sleeved shirt that he’d pushed back the sleeves of.

I was glad I’d resisted the urge to put on jeans and had arrived instead in an oversized t-shirt and running shorts.

“Where’s Cian?” I asked as Akiva made another face at my cup. I could have adjusted my wolf ears and listened for him, but that seemed rude to do in his own house.

“Sleeping,” Indra replied, gesturing for me to follow him off the threshold. “You can play watchdog today if you want, Akiva. The old lady’s got the phone out,” he informed the lich.

“She *always* has her stupid phone out so she can threaten to call the cops on us,” Akiva mumbled. “Perhaps we could give her something to call *about?”* He batted his eyes at us teasingly.

I rolled my eyes at him and settled onto the couch next to Indra with my knees curled up in front of me. “Do it with yourself,” I replied. “We’re drinking tea.”

Indra lifted his cup in a mock toast and nodded in agreement.

“You act like stuffy old zombies when you have tea,” Akiva said, putting both hands on his slim hips. I wasn’t quite sure what zombies acted like, apart from the shambling, but only raised a brow at the insult.

“Perish the thought,” Indra denied. “We would never encroach on your territory, my love.”

“You’re only talking to me like this because you outnumber me,” the lich accused. “If Cian were awake, you wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, he looks serious, Indra,” I said, leaning over to murmur conspiratorially in the hellhound’s furry black ear.

“Clearly, we’ve gone too far,” he agreed solemnly. “We have only one option left.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“We tie him up.”

Akiva’s face morphed to poorly disguised amusement. “A truly heinous punishment,” he said. “Perhaps you will gag me too, so I cannot call for our adoring vampire?”

“Surely.” Indra got to his feet. “You can stay here, George. I’m going to get the rope.” He meandered out of the room, still sipping his tea.

The rope? We were tying Akiva up? I couldn’t suppress the excited shiver that went down my spine.

“Why’s Cian sleeping?” I asked when I could barely see Indra. The hellhound had opened a hall closet and was rummaging around intently.

“Hmm?” Akiva sat down beside me on the sofa and shifted so he could sit cross-legged on the wide cushion. “He is tired,” the lich said after a moment. “There is a lot of energy involved in being a new vampire king. He’s had two attempts on his life this week.”

An unpleasant chill went down my spine. “What?” Akiva watched my face as I spoke, as if keenly interested in my response. “Why didn’t you tell me? I could help–“

“No,” he admonished. “Even we cannot help in some things v*ampire*.”

“They tolerate us, to an extent.” Indra came back into the room with coils of red rope and a pair of scissors that he laid on the end table. “Me, because they think I’m his pet. Akiva, because he’s like a…distant cousin, you could say.”

I still wanted to help. Even if they didn’t need or want it, it was in my *nature* to worry.

“Do the vampires here not like him?” I took the rope he handed me, surprised at the soft, satin-like feel of it.

“Vampires tend to not tolerate change well, as a general rule,” Akiva shrugged. “It comes from being so long lived, I should think.”

“So we’re tying you up with this?” I asked, unsure what else to say on the topic of Cian. I wanted to *help*, but I also didn’t want to stick my nose in where it wasn’t at all wanted.

“Unless you have secret rigging lessons I am not aware of, Indra will be doing the tying,” Akiva informed me, plucking the rope from my hands. “I see you brought the *fancy* stuff.”

“We have company,” Indra shrugged, finishing off his tea with a wink at me. “I thought she’d appreciate the way it looks against your skin.” He walked to Akiva’s end of the sofa and leaned down, pressing his lips to the lich’s. “Love you.”

Akiva’s smile was warm and completely genuine. “I love you too.”

When they kissed, it was sweet. Not hot, like most of our kisses were, or lust-filled. Just…sweet.

A thought occurred to me that I stuffed very far down in my brain until it was buried.

I was jealous.

Not of them specifically. They’d been together for years and years, I knew. I did not begrudge them that, and I myself had no ambitions towards monogamy. But I’d never had someone to look at me like that and say they loved me the way that these two had.

The only people who *had* ever told me they’d loved me were my family members. Aveline liked to screech the words as she ran out of the house

with wet hair and possibly having ‘borrowed’ something of mine to wear, but that was quite obviously not the same.

What was it like, to mean so much to another person and know without a doubt that your feelings were reciprocated with no reservations?

Blinking, I found that both men were staring at me, and I could *feel* the blush rising to my face.

“What?” asked Akiva, suspicion written in his expression.

“Nothing,” I denied. “I was just thinking.”

“About *what*?” he pressed.

I spoke without giving it much thought, intent on keeping my true feelings hidden. “About–well about all the things that can be done to you after you’re all tied up.”

“Honestly, George,” the lich sighed with a shake of his head. “You have such a dirty mind. Can’t I kiss my love without your thoughts going straight to the gutter?”

“No,” I said forlornly, widening my eyes so I could give him my best puppy-dog expression. “I suppose you can’t.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

I didn't have the heart to tell Indra I didn't understand much of what he was explaining.

After covering the laugh at my words, he'd ordered Akiva to strip down to his boxers, which the lich did without complaint. I certainly wasn't complaining either.

Immaturely, he threw his shirt at my face. I caught it unerringly and threw it to hang on the stair railing.

"Don't be a child," I admonished, trying to stifle my own amusement. "Aren't you the oldest one here? Act like it."

"Sit on the floor," Indra told him, prodding him with two fingers to get his attention. "So I can show George what I'm doing."

He'd done that willingly too, and I couldn't help but consider what a nice bottom he'd make.

It was *definitely* on my bucket list to see him get dominated thoroughly by Cian, instead of just the bit of play they'd done at the club.

Once he was sitting and I'd joined them on the white carpet, Indra had proceeded to explain to me the steps he was taking as his hands moved quickly on the rope and Akiva's arms. Before I knew it, the lich had both his arms bound behind him, with the ropes forming interconnected knots that ultimately looped around his throat and pulled his back straight.

He'd been right; the red rope *was* very pretty on Akiva's dark olive skin.

"Do you want to try?" invited Indra. "I'll untie him and walk you through it, if you'd like."

I wasn't sure how to say that to him, he'd just worked some inconceivable magic on Akiva that I had no chance of replicating.

Clearly, it was time to go home and thoroughly research rigging and different ties.

“I’ll watch you….do it again?” I offered from where I sat beside the hellhound. “I’m just not so sure where to start.”

Akiva craned backward on the white carpet as far as his arms would allow to stare up at me with his long-lashed eyes.

I flicked his forehead.

“Weren’t we going to gag him?” I added, before either of them could speak. “I could do that. It was going to be my favorite part.”

“If you’re worried about me yelling for Cian’s help in subduing the both of you and heroically rescuing me, you’re a bit late,” the lich informed me. “He’s already awake.”

“He is?” I was surprised-even without my wolf ears, my hearing was very good, and I would’ve thought that I could hear him moving around on the floor above.

“He’s still in bed,” Indra added. “But Akiva’s right, he *is* awake.”

“Telepathically connected lovers was not something I was expecting from you three,” I told them both.

“It’s not that,” Indra replied. “Not *exactly* like that.”

I didn’t miss the way Akiva watched him intently, his eyes narrowing like he was trying to guess what Indra would say.

Was there a secret here that they weren’t telling me? This wasn’t the first time they’d made me wonder.

It really wasn’t my business, and I didn’t want to make it a big deal. I smiled, then ran my fingers through Akiva’s coarse black hair. “It’s fine,” I laughed. “You don’t have to explain anything to me.”

Their eyes met for half a second, and it occurred to me that Akiva was not so good at controlling his expressions as much as he might think.

But it *still* was not my business. I would keep repeating that until I convinced myself not to chase my tail over yet another puzzle.

“Why don’t you let me practice on you?” Akiva offered. “Have you ever done any rope bondage before?”

“No,” I admitted, distracted from their secrets.

“He’s better.” Akiva nodded to Indra. “And he’s the only one of us who knows anything about true shibari, but I get by.”

“That hardly seems fair,” I replied as Indra started to undo the knots on his arms. “Why is it *I’m* always the one on the bottom?” My protests

weren’t genuine. Being in Akiva’s position seemed a lot more fun than being the one doing the tying, though that didn’t mean I had no interest in learning.

“Because, George,” the lich sighed, flexing his wrists slightly. “You are such a submissive. You *live* for being on the bottom.”

“Maybe I’m a switch.”

They both looked at me, with Indra’s fingers pausing on the rope.

“Okay, you–school your expression better,” I said to Indra. “You, stop smirking.” I pushed Akiva’s face away from me lightly.

From above me, I heard footsteps, finally audible to my human ears and signaling to me that Cian was awake. The steps went from the bedroom to the bathroom, and a second later, I heard the sound of the shower going full blast.

“Do you think I should leave?” I asked, listening to the sound of the water.

“Why?” Indra pulled more of the knots free, working quickly but gracefully.

“Well…if he’s tired from vampire stuff and whatever, I don’t want to bother him.”

The truth was that, of the three of them, Cian was the one I understood the least. He seemed more distant than Akiva or Indra, and not quite as willing to get close to me.

Sometimes I couldn’t help but wonder if half the reason he let me come around was because *they* had more interest in me than *him.*

The night in the bayou hadn’t exactly helped. Even if he *had* apologized after telling me to stop helping and that I’d only end up getting hurt.

Akiva, now free, turned to push my knees to the floor and straddled my lap. Surprised, I blinked and met his gaze.

“You don’t need to leave unless you *want* to,” he said. “We aren’t doing anything today, and if Cian wants to be grumpy-which I very much doubt he does-then he can stay in his room.”

“Which he won’t,” Indra added, coiling the rope around his arm.

“Which he won’t,” Akiva agreed. “Now, would you like to get tied up, George? So that Indra can critique my work? I know how much you enjoy it when someone is not complimenting me, rare as the occasions are.”

I hadn’t expected him so close so quickly, and heat coiled low in my body. I sucked in a breath, wanting more. I always wanted more when it

came to them.

“Oh, I suppose,” I told him, leaning back slightly to rest my weight on my hand. The other I pressed to his cheek, smiling when he turned his face into my palm. He kissed my skin lightly, then stood in one fluid motion to step back.

“Take your shirt off, and your shorts,” he ordered in a low, husky tone that sent goosebumps racing along my skin. He took the rope from Indra and considered it. “Did you bring out any more rope?”

“No,” the hellhound said, getting to his feet. “You want more?”

I saw Akiva nod as I stood to remove my t-shirt, which I carefully laid near the door with my shoes.

I didn’t want to throw my clothes all around their house, and the windows by the door were securely blocked off by the heavy red curtains.

Some petty part of me, however, wanted to open the window to see if the old ladies were still there. If they were, I would wave.

I refrained, however, and slid my shorts off so they could join the pile of my belongings. On top of those, I laid my keys and phone, which had previously been in my pockets. Finally, I took off the jawbone necklace and put it down as well.

Akiva’s eyes dropped to my black panties when I turned to close the distance between us.

A smirk tugged at his lips.

“You have something to say?” I asked sweetly, his eyes still on the pink, cursive *meow* that was spelled out across my black, lacy bra.

“I guess ‘awoo’ was sold out?” He asked, face so close to mine that I could feel the tickle of his breath against my skin. His scent enveloped me, a heady mixture of cinnamon and something unfamiliar but sharp that I could never tire of.

I took in a deep breath. “No. Clearly, I am a cat.”

“Oh? Then come here, pretty kitty.” The lich hadn’t put his clothes on either, which I wasn’t complaining about.

I pressed close to him, my breasts brushing his chest as my thigh slid between his. I grinned, and he leaned down, pressing his lips to mine for only a moment.

“Bad kitty,” he told me a second later. “Trying to distract me when I want to tie you up.”

I rolled my eyes. “My bad. You want me to sit?”

“No, stand there for me. And stop talking back, little cat.”

Indra sat, back against the coffee table as both of us watched Akiva find the middle of his rope.

“Arms up?” The lich requested. I bit my tongue to bite back a sarcastic reply that might delay his hands on my skin. I reached up quietly, his arms going around my body to skim the middle of my back, just under my bra. His fingers were cold against my skin, but still sent shivers down my spine that had nothing to do with temperature.

“First I find the small of your back…” He held the middle loop of the rope there, and twined the other around me, just under my breasts.

I tried to watch, but it was very difficult when half of what he was doing was out of my visual reach.

Finally, I gave up with a soft huff, instead staring at the white ceiling and finding myself focusing more on the slide of the soft rope on my skin when he looped it over my shoulders and around my chest. He never tied it too tightly, though I could feel the slide and pull of the silky material constantly.

I forced myself to remain impassive. He was clearly focused, and I wasn’t sure me telling him how nice it felt would be what he wanted to hear. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

My wandering eyes found Indra’s, and he grinned at my expression. Always so intuitive. He had to know exactly what was going through my mind.

“I think you’re turning her into a rope bunny,” the hellhound remarked.

Akiva glanced at him, then straightened to look at me. I schooled my face to blankness once more.

“Oh? Do you like this so very much?” He asked, running his fingers over the two sets of ropes that crisscrossed under my throat.

“I suppose it’s okay,” I downplayed.

He didn’t look very convinced.

“What do you think?” He asked a moment later, stepping back so Indra could see.

“I think you’ve been watching that guy’s knot tutorials a lot lately, and it’s paid off.” Indra stood, coming over to run his fingers over the rope.

“These are a lot better,” he remarked, testing a knot. “And it’s not too loose.” He walked behind me, hands stroking over the knots and my skin.

It was a lot to pretend to ignore, and I bit my lip. “What’s it look like?” I asked finally, when Indra had stepped back. But he wasn’t the one who answered.

“Come see?” Before I could agree, Akiva hooked a finger in the looped tie just under the center of my chest. He pulled me to the first floor bathroom, flipping on the light when he stepped through the door.

“Oh wow,” I murmured, surprised at what I saw. The ropes looping over my body were done so in a near-perfect pentagram pattern. “Akiva, this is so cool.” Unable to help it, I ran my fingers over the ropes that made up the lines of the red pentagram on my pale skin.

“You like it, then?” Standing behind me, he wrapped his arms loosely around my waist and rested his chin on my shoulder. “I don’t just mean the look of it.” His grin was mischievous.

“I *like* it,” I replied quietly, wondering if his hands would move from my hips to explore other places that I’d like him to touch.

“Shall I remove it so you can be more comfortable while you spend time with us? Unless you’re…leaving soon?” He asked innocently, like he wasn’t deathly curious.

“I’m here for anything. Not like I have plans until later,” I said.

“Oh? You have plans tonight? He dragged me back to the living room, very attached to using my new pentagram harness as a, well, *harness*.

“I do. Are you jealous?”

“Do those plans involve Yuna?” Indra inferred with a soft smirk.

“No,” I admitted after a few moments of consideration. “I have some work to do tonight.”

“That sounds terribly suspicious,” the lich pointed out.

“Does it?” I batted my eyes at him sweetly. His own narrowed.

“You aren’t in trouble, are you?” Indra asked doubtfully.

Again I hesitated. “Remember the other night? When I visited, uh…” I hadn’t quite explained it to them. I didn’t want to start now. They had their own problems to see to, and I didn’t want them worrying about mine. “Bullet point version is, some other magic users helped me with my summoning. In return, they asked me to check something out with them. I’m going to go do that tonight.”

“Where are you going?” Akiva’s voice was carefully neutral. I wasn’t fooled.

“To do a thing,” I replied. “Look, it’s fine. I’m really not in any danger, I promise.”

They traded a look that I didn’t need to read more into.

The two of them didn’t *trust* my words.

“I could leave it on,” Akiva lifted one shoulder, then let it fall. “We could tie her up very easily with it.”

“Oh, take it off,” Indra chuckled. “You aren’t leaving soon, right?”

“Right,” I reaffirmed. “Unless you or your *vampire king* up there are going to kick me out.”

“The *vampire king* has no intention of kicking you out,” Cian called, his footsteps sounding at the top of the stairs.

I looked up, lifting my arms when Akiva gestured for me to do so.

As the lich undid the ropes, I eyed Cian. He looked so tired and….normal.

Usually, the vampire was the very embodiment of authority and dominance. It was hot.

Now it seemed he’d decided to grace us mere peasants with his unpolished self.

His black v-neck fit loosely, and the fabric was worn as if it had gone through the wash one too many times. His grey sweatpants were barely any better, and were baggy on his frame.

On second thought, the outfit didn’t dim his brilliance whatsoever. He could still put me on my knees, no matter what he wore or how messy his hair was.

Akiva slid the ropes off of me, giving me a quick pat on the head that made me snort.

"Thank you for letting me practice my profound skills upon you, George,” the lich said theatrically as he coiled the red rope around his arm. “Perhaps next time I shall hang you from the rafters.”

I turned, my eyebrows lifting in interest. “Oh?”

“No,” Indra remarked, taking the rope from him. “I’m not letting him hang you from the ceiling.”

Akiva and I looked at one another. He wiggled his brows. I smirked.

Fingers combed through my hair, surprising me into glancing upward at Cian’s smile.

“It’s been a little while,” the vampire purred, leaning down to kiss my cheek and nearly turning my knees to jelly. “I hope Akiva isn’t succeeding

in chasing you off?”

“If I say yes, will you punish him?” I asked solemnly.

Cian’s grin grew. “I might.”

“I’ll like it,” the lich reminded me, sinking down onto the sofa.

“I’ll like it more,” I promised. Unwilling to keep my hands to myself, I rested them lightly against Cian’s chest, if just to touch him.

“Do you guys want to get some lunch?” Cian asked, placing his hands over mine and stroking his thumbs lightly across my skin.

“Depends,” Indra said, coming back to sit next to Akiva on the sofa. “Are we cooking, ordering, or going out?”

“I don’t think I’m dressed particularly well for going *out*,” the vampire chuckled. “And I won’t ask you to cook after last night.”

Dear Goddess, I’d never seen such a suggestive smirk. I turned, following his gaze to see Indra very carefully looking anywhere but at us.

I needed *all* of the filthy details, if Indra was willing to share.

When Cian drew away from me and made for the kitchen, I wandered over to sit down beside Indra, not very convincing in my act at being casual.

“*So*,” I began, leaning my bare shoulder against his.

The hellhound’s eyes landed squarely on mine, then dipped lower.

“So,” he agreed, lifting a hand to run it over the edge of my bra.

I fought a shiver. “You have to tell me. I’ll die if you don’t tell me.” I batted my eyes at him.

Akiva snickered on his other side.

“Oh yes,” the hellhound agreed airily. “I can practically see you wilting from the pain of not knowing.” He tried to look solemn, but failed miserably when a friendly smile curved his lips upward. “Fine. But only because you’re cute.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

Shifting so I could look up at the starless sky above the city, I inhaled deeply as I waited for Nathanial outside of his voodoo shop.

I could smell the rain in the air, even though I'd only been outside for a few minutes.

Rain, and something else.

But I couldn't place the *something else.*

The door opened and closed behind me, the sound of a key sliding in a lock loud to my sensitive ears. I'd packed away my wolf ears for the night, after letting my hybrid features fly free all afternoon with the guys.

While I couldn't be sure, I didn't think flouting my heritage around in the voodoo community would be my best bet. At the very least, it would draw the kind of attention to me that I had no need for tonight.

Nathaniel stood beside me, hands in his pockets as he looked over the street in front of us. "Do you smell that?" He asked, voice quiet.

"The rain?" I asked, getting to my feet and dusting off my leggings. I'd forgone the usual jeans and t-shirt combo tonight. Instead, I wore a black skirt over leggings, ankle boots, and a long-sleeved red shirt. My hair was in a messy bun on top of my head, and I didn't carry my usual thigh bag with me tonight.

"No. The *other* thing."

I inhaled again, easing my control on my wolf self and filtering through the scents of the city in my nostrils. "I don't know what that is," I admitted, unable to place the sharp, hot scent that seemed to almost burn.

"It's voodoo. The bad kind." Nathanial's voice was grim.

I looked at him, eyes wide, to see that he was already looking at *me*. “Then we should follow it,” I assumed. “If it’s dark voodoo–“

“We’d never find it,” Nathaniel explained. “At any given time, there’s all kinds of bad things going on in this city. Voodoo, witch magic, and everything else you could dream up.”

“But not like this,” I argued.

“Not like this, sure. But that doesn’t mean we could find it. You might be able to follow the scent for a block or two, but it’ll shift. I guarantee it.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him, but I also had no notion of how to track down dark magic if it wasn’t hitting me upside the head.

“What do you think it is?” I asked, following him off the patio of the shop and along the sidewalk.

“It’s bad,” he said flatly, adjusting his suit jacket.

I was very glad I’d dressed better than normal, now that I saw him in his fitted dress pants, shirt, and jacket. I didn’t want to stick out more than I already would tonight, being a witch amongst voodoo practitioners.

As we walked, the familiar parts of the city fell away. I’d never gone much further than Marin’s shop, and now the shops had melted into residential buildings and small houses.

He was right about not finding it. While we traversed the streets, the scent of bad magic lessened, strengthened, or became indiscernible entirely. One moment I’d be sure we’d stumbled into something bad, while the next I had nothing in my nose except the scent of the river and the harsh smells of the city.

Finally, he stopped, resting a hand on a small, white fence that bordered a very square property. The threatening rain still had not come, though the air was cold and damp with the promise of it.

The house that sat back from the street was also very square, and very tidy. Pillars appeared to raise the front up, and large windows shone with golden light. The siding had to have been light colored as well, but in the darkness I could barely make it out.

Two people stood on a small balcony that overlooked the path leading to the house, and from the light behind them, I could see that they were looking straight at us.

“I thought we were going to a funeral,” I mumbled, my ears catching the occasional sound of upbeat music from inside the house.

“Johanna’s nephew has been dead for nine days,” Nathanial replied, just as quietly. “This is the day we send his spirit to the afterlife with a celebration, of sorts. George.” He rested a hand on my arm. “I trust I don’t need to worry about you insulting our traditions and culture, do I?” His dark eyes held mine.

“You don’t,” I promised. “I might be a witch, but I have nothing but respect for other magic users, no matter what brand of power they carry.” While I had heard of many witches looking down on voodoo practitioners, shamans, and other groups that did not worship the Goddess, I had never counted myself among them.

“Johanna knows you’re coming. My mother told her, so I am not sure how she feels about it,” Nathanial admitted. “Come on.” He set off at a brisk walk up the cobblestone path and took the porch steps two at a time.

I followed a pace behind him, my eyes on the people looking down at us.

He didn’t knock on the huge wooden door, but it opened as soon as he set foot on the welcome mat in front of it. The sounds of at least a dozen people and the music flooded my sensitive ears, flowing out and around the woman who looked at us with unfriendly eyes.

The woman who answered the door couldn’t have been much older than my own mother. Her narrowed gaze went straight to me, as if Nathanial hadn’t been at her door as well, and her lips pressed together in a thin line.

“So. You really brought the witch, Nathanial,” she murmured in a voice that held a thick, creole accent.

My companion shifted uncomfortably. “Johanna, I know my mother told you-“

“She did,” Johanna interrupted. “Your cousins are in the kitchen,” she informed my companion, who blinked in surprise.

“I think maybe–“ Nathanial began.

“You can see if the others need help with anything.” I’d never heard such an absolutely final dismissal in my life.

Nathanial gave me a quick look, frown evident on his features, before he let Johanna usher him in and down the hall.

My stomach twisted in discontent. Had he really left me alone with no second thought when the woman *clearly* didn’t like me?

She leaned against the frame, eyeing me with the same thoughtful look.

“I’m not here to–“

“I know very well why you’re here,” she interrupted.

I locked my jaws together, reminding myself that I was only this irritated with her because the full moon was getting so near.

When I didn’t speak, she went on. “This is a sendoff for my nephew. The boy who meant the most to me in this world. Why would I want a *witch* to come in and sully my home with her magic and her misunderstandings?”

“Because this witch wants to help,” I replied evenly. “Even if you think she does not.”

“What do you think you will find that I could not? Do you think I did not examine his body for traces of who did this?”

“I don’t think that at all–“

“Then you think your magic *better* than mine?”

I took a deep breath, holding her eyes as I sucked in air and let it out between my lips. “I am only here to see if I can help,” I said again, not sure what *else* to say. I could make no promises, and she was absolutely right.

What could I find, that she had not?

“You will leave within the hour,” she warned, opening the door a bit further. “We have our rituals to attend to, to make sure Yvenson has his proper send-off.” Her voice wavered. “Good as your intentions may be, the presence of your magic will not be welcome for those.”

“I understand completely.”

She hesitated a moment longer, then pulled the door open.

“Thank you,” I told her, stepping past her and into the white floored and white walled hallway. She followed me as I walked, my eyes going from painting to painting that hung on the walls of the hall.

“They are some of our elders,” Johanna explained when she saw me hesitate in front of one. A bronze nameplate glittered under the painting, drawing my gaze to the engraved letters that spelled out *Paul*.

“They’re beautiful,” I complimented, slowing once more to appreciate a painting of a woman with runes painted on her hands and shoulders.

“My mother,” Johanna commented, walking past me and gesturing for me to start moving.

The hallway opened up slightly to reveal a spiral staircase, but the woman lead me past that and into the next room. To my left was a very modern kitchen, its granite countertops polished under heaping trays of food and drinks. On the other side was a dining table with more food and a large floral arrangement against the wall.

Ahead of us, through an open arch, lay what appeared to be a family room. The carpet was white, and somehow looked pristine even with so many people in attendance. The walls were dark red, and the furniture had been placed against the walls to make room for a large wooden casket on its stand at the far end.

My stomach clenched, and I cast a glance around the room.

Many people were staring at me, and none looked like they were waiting to come say hello. A man whispered something in his partner's ear, and the woman looked away when she caught my eye.

Oh well. I hadn't come here to be liked, though I would've hoped to receive a *slightly* warmer reception than this.

"They're being rude, auntie," Nathanial had approached again, standing at my side. He glared at a woman who stared at me until she looked away. "She only wants to help, and she was *invited."* It felt a little better to have him back at my side, though his help seemed ethereal at best.

"We will take charge of her, lest you be charged with taking sides, Nathanial," said a new woman, approaching from my other side with a man at her elbow.

I turned to look at her, a word of thanks ready at my lips, and paused.

She looked familiar, though I couldn't say where I'd seen her before. Dressed in a snugly fitting black dress, she looked almost inappropriate for the occasion. Her black hair fell loose around her sharp featured face, and when I met her green eyes, I blinked.

She smiled slowly, head tipping to the side. For a moment-barely a breath-her eyes shifted from green to red.

A thrill shot through me, and I switched my gaze to the man with her. He too looked familiar, and grinned when I looked him in the eye.

His went blue, then back to their nondescript brown.

The Loa.

"Let them," Johanna said, over Nathanial's quiet protest.

"We aren't staying long ourselves," the Loa in disguise went on. "We'll see her through her business, then out your door, Johanna." She reached out and gripped my wrist with a very tight grip.

Before Nathanial could speak once more, I interrupted. "It's all right," I promised. "I appreciate it, truly." I let the woman draw me closer, nose itching at her scent that reminded me of–

Ashes.

This was the Loa who had wanted to kill Merric.

Forcing myself to keep my face blank, I didn't miss the way her smile grew at my realization.

"I don't want to cause you any trouble," I went on when I was sure I could speak evenly over my surprise. "If they're willing to help me, I'll accept it and leave."

Johanna nodded. "See that she leaves before we begin our chants," she said curtly to the male Loa. Then she turned, dragging Nathanial away with her.

"Does she know?" I murmured, loud enough for only my two companions to hear.

"Of course she does not," the Loa beside me chuckled. "They think we are distant, concerned relatives. Do you remember our names?"

"Marinette Bras Cheche," I recited. "And…" I looked at the grinning man beside her. In this disguise, he wasn't nearly so handsome or intimidating as he had been before. The same went for her. "The Baron Kriminel?"

"Very good," the Baron complimented.

"What are you doing here? I thought Maman Brigitte–"

"We are no wolves, to go only where our pack leader permits," Marinette interrupted. "We wished to come, so we did."

"Aren't you happy to see us?" The Baron asked. "You have no allies here, you know. Even Nathanial would leave you behind, if it came to it."

"Well, yeah," I shrugged. "They have no reason to trust me, and certainly no reason to like me."

Both of them grinned, almost in unison. It was rather creepy, in my opinion.

"I want to look at his body," I said after a few moments of listening to the conversation around me. Most of it had to do with the dead man, though a few people did speak of the audacity I must have by being here.

Some wanted me gone, which was unsurprising, but I needed to *see*.

"Then let us escort you." Marinette's grip shifted to my elbow, and she drew me through the living room and to the coffin at its head. "A gorgeous sendoff, don't you think?" She asked as the Baron followed us closely. "Befitting someone far grander than poor Yvenson here."

"Why do you say that?" I stopped at the side of the coffin, taking shallow breaths through my mouth so I wouldn't have to drag in the scent

of preserved death through my sensitive nose.

It found me anyway, sticking to my throat no matter how much I tried to avoid it.

“She won’t admit it, but he was very nearly a *Bokor* himself,” the Baron said, drawing even on my other side. “He lost our favor many years ago.”

“But you still care for him.”

“We care for all of our children,” Marinette agreed. She reached out to rest a hand against his chest, eyes intent on his lifeless face. “We do not like to see them meet untimely ends.”

“Why does Maman Brigitte think I can see something that you two don’t?” I asked, looking over his pressed suit, clasped hands, and ashen face. He’d been attractive in life, I thought absently. Perhaps a century and a half or so, since he looked only a touch older than I did. His full lips were made for smiling, and long lashes dusted his cheeks.

I didn’t like observing him like a museum exhibit, and ground my teeth together in discomfort. I had no business here, and this only reminded me of that.

“I am not sure,” Marinette shrugged. “She is a little bit witch herself, you know. Summoning is not voodoo magic, though she has bent it enough that it is very nearly so. I believe she has a soft spot for you.”

“That doesn’t mean I have any business here,” I muttered. “And if your people can’t figure it out, then I don’t see why I can either.”

“Then you can’t,” Marinette shrugged. “And so you tell Maman Brigitte that. She lets you keep that necklace, it’s bound to you after all, and life goes on. Perhaps someone else will figure it out, or perhaps something bad is brewing, and no one will catch it before it’s a storm in our harbor.”

I turned to look at her, a frown on my lips. “You’re really dramatic, you know that?”

She smiled, showing very white teeth. “And you are *very* precious for saying so. How is your fox, by the way?”

“Not now, Marinette,” The Baron said quietly at my other side. “Look now and look hard, witch. Your time here nears its end.”

I didn’t need to try to figure out what he meant. I’d figured that my hour would end up much *less*, so I focused on Yvenson’s still body.

There was nothing. He was just a dead body, an empty shell that smelled of death, embalming, and nothing else.

But that wasn’t right.

For a witch, anyway, our magic was bound to our bones. That was why witches were burned in most cases, after all, so our bodies could not be used for other means.

But this man smelled of no power at all. It was as if his body was human.

Did it work differently for voodoo practitioners?

“What’s that around his neck?” I asked in a low hiss, leaning towards Baron Kriminel.

“Hmm?” He reached out, hooking one finger under a leather strap that held a small bag around the dead man’s neck. “It’s a gris-gris.”

“Grab it,” I hissed.

“*Excuse* you?” His brows shot up. “You want me to steal–“

“Just part of it. A magical part. Come *on*,” I urged.

“Little girl, I am a *Loa*–“

“Yes, yes, I am sure you are much too high and mighty to steal from the dead. That’s fine, but I need something that smells like his magic.”

Baron Kriminel sighed and reached out to press a hand over the man’s chest. When he pulled back, the gris-gris was back under his shirt. The Loa opened his hand, revealing a shiny, dark silver stone no bigger than the nail of my pinky. “It’s hematite,” he commented. “Strengthened for protection.”

I took it from his hand and palmed the stone, just as the talking behind me got louder.

“We want you to leave,” A man said, hands in his pockets as he stood at the bottom of the casket. “You’re distressing Johanna, and there ain’t no need for that. I understand you think you’re helping, but–“

“No, you’re right,” I interrupted, smiling as beatifically as I knew how. “Thank you for allowing me a short time here. I’m sorry for your loss.” I nodded my head, and he did the same politely.

“We’ll walk you out,” Marinette said, still holding onto my arm. The three of us walked out, with Nathanial sending a small, unsure wave my way as if in apology.

Once outside, I kept walking until the three of us were outside the perimeter and another house down before I stopped.

“Are your people like witches?” I asked, shaking free of Marinette. When I turned to look at them, the Loa wore their normal faces, and their eyes were jewel bright. “When they die, does their magic stay with them, as a witch’s magic does?”

“Of course,” Marinette traded a look with the Baron’s. “At his death, Yvenson’s body was checked for his magic. It is common practice so that foul play is evident from the start.”

“His magic isn’t there,” I said flatly.

“It was a week ago,” Marinette promised. “Otherwise, his family would be burning down the city looking for the thief. In all deaths like this, a ritual is performed to make sure it was not stolen.”

“It’s not,” I promised. “There was nothing in his body at *all*. It was as if a human lie there in that coffin, not a voodoo priest.”

The two of them traded a very long look. Marinette’s brows rose slightly, and the Baron Kriminel tipped his head to the side as if in answer to a question.

“We will think this over,” the man said. “If what you say is true, there could be many explanations for it. It *has* been nine days, after all.” But he watched Marinette as he said it, and somehow I didn’t believe that he believed his own words.

“It’s time for us to go,” Marinette said after a pause. “Back home. We’ve been here for too long.”

They seemed to have forgotten about the small stone I held in my hand, and that was completely fine by me.

“Have fun teleporting back to your island or whatever, “ I said blithely, wiggling the fingers of my free hand in farewell.

“Your well wishes are noted,” Baron Kriminel said dryly.

“Yes, they are. And oh, Hybrid-Witch?” Marinette smiled. I didn’t like it. “If you use that stone to harm any of our children, I’ll make you wish you were never born.”

Damn. Guess she *had* remembered. “I’m not going to–“

In a flash of bright flame that blinded me for a moment, they disappeared.

“I’m not going to do anything like that,” I muttered, on the off chance they could still hear me.

But I was going to put it to use, as the last trace of Yvenson’s magic.

And really, what better time to do so than right now?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

While I might not have my scrying crystal on me, there was more than one way to find what I needed.

If there was anything left to find, at least.

I drew away from the residential street, stopping only when the buildings had become dark, and I couldn't see light from any of their windows.

While I wasn't exactly hiding anything, I also didn't need anyone interrupting me.

I didn't draw my witch magic to me. Instead, I pulled my wolf to the surface. That other part of me rippled against my skin, my wolf begging me to let her free and change.

I pushed her down, just a bit. It wasn't the full moon, but it was close enough that the wolf's protests rang in my skull like howls.

I just needed some of the wolf. Enough that my tail curled at my lower back, and my ears pricked for any trace of sound.

My lips parted as fangs pressed against my tongue, and when I stared at the small piece of hematite in my hand, I knew my eyes had changed as well. So clearly I could pick out little imperfections and facets of the stone, where it had looked nearly smooth before.

Now I could hear the sounds of people in the houses and buildings around me. Muffled through doors and walls, but the shuffles and rustles of the living were there all the same.

I pushed it away.

Focusing on the stone, I closed my eyes and drew it to my face, nose only inches above my palm.

If my friends were here, I had no doubt they would have comments about the way I scented the stone for traces of Yvenson's magic.

There it was. Faint, as the protections on this had not been renewed, but there all the same. His magic was foreign to my nose, and seemed to hold a burnt, bitter edge. It was very unique, if nothing else, though certainly not pleasant. What gave his magic that strange, acrid quality? None of the people at the funeral had smelled like that. Nor had the Loa.

Was it because of what the Loa had said? Because he was *Bokor?*

I tucked the stone in my pocket and sniffed the air experimentally. No magic. Not like before. I was still on edge, but I couldn't catch a whiff of concrete power, even half-shifted and with my wolf clawing at the surface as I was.

I guess it was unreasonable of me to think it would be so easy.

Walking back towards Nathanial's shop, I kept my wolf at the surface as I went. While I still couldn't place the feeling, something was putting me on edge.

Perhaps it was purely psychological, I considered, boots clicking on the sidewalk as storefronts came and went in front of me. If Nathanial was right, then New Orleans was always like this. Maybe I just hadn't noticed before now.

His shop came into view first, with the bright mural near me acting as a landmark for both his and my place of work.

I stopped, gazing at the wall not for the first time.

It was a *lot*, in my opinion. Caricatures of men and women dancing to a brass band, while another figure with a skull-like mask rose above them with lips spread in a wide grin. It was old, though someone had put a spell on it to make the paint last.

Even that was beginning to fade, however. The paint was chipping in spots closest to the ground or edge. It would last a few years more, but once the magic holding it on the wall crumbled, it would be gone.

I wondered what had happened to the witch or practitioner who had placed protections on the mural. Why hadn't they come back to fix it?

Whatever the case, it wasn't my responsibility. Even if I had wanted to fix it, I didn't know just what magic was already on it. I didn't want to mess up–

The masked figure *blinked*.

My hackles were on edge instantly. I stepped back, sure that I'd never seen that particular trick of this wall. And I'd stared at it quite a few times by now. I would've noticed.

The figure looked *straight at me*, smiled, and then the movement drained out of the painting. I could feel the magic going into the pavement at my feet, and I looked down like I might be able to see it.

I couldn't, obviously, but that did nothing for my nerves.

Looking at the painting again, I searched it for any sign of movement.

Nothing. It was just as lifeless as it had been before.

"What the hell…" I murmured, taking a few steps forward until I stood only inches away from the wall.

Tentatively, I laid my hand on the brick.

There was something *there*. Something laid deep in the wall, some kind of magic, that escaped my grasp and my search. No matter how I tried, I couldn't get it in my senses long enough to discover what it might be.

Or what kind of person had created the spell.

After a few useless minutes of grasping at it, I stepped back with a sigh. Whatever it was, the magic wasn't *harmful*. Probably. But I couldn't tell more than that.

The magic in the bricks wasn't what made the mural move. Of that, I was very sure.

With a shake of my head, I walked around the wall, fighting not to look at it in case it moved again. It *wouldn't*, I repeated over and over in my head. The magic is *gone*.

When nothing did happen, and when no giant masked figure burst free from the brick to chase me down the street, I forced myself to relax by increments.

I would go home, I decided. My car was right in front of me, and this was a safe area of town. Apart from weird outdoor murals that moved.

Maybe I'd even see if Merric wanted to spend time together soon.

With one hand on the driver's side door, I paused. My eyes narrowed, the very blue reflections of them bright in my SUV's window.

Had I heard…?

No. Probably not–

"*Help me!"*

Yeah. I definitely had. The hair on my arms stood up, and I whirled, eyes searching the building around me. The sound had been muffled, and

broke off at the end like whoever had yelled was forcibly silenced.

No lights had come on in the street. No one else had heard the cry.

“Damn,” I hissed, pushing away from my vehicle and scanning the buildings on either side of me. I didn’t know this part of town well, save for where I worked, and I couldn’t begin to guess who lived or worked here. As far as I knew, this street was all businesses. It was late, so why was anyone *here?*

The woman screamed wordlessly, the sound bloodcurdling. Unthinking, I took off towards it at a run, the scream still echoing off of the walls around me.

The full moon being as close as it was lent me the strength of my wolf with me barely having to ask, but that power came with the emotions and the instincts that rubbed against my skin, wanting me to shift and rip apart whatever was causing harm.

The thing that dragged me back was the sudden scent in the air that slammed into me, nearly choking me.

Yvenson’s magic. I couldn’t mistake it now. The magic was mixed in with other scents-other magics-that I couldn’t identify, but the smell of burning wove through the different magics in the air harshly.

I slowed, taking in my surroundings now that I was close to what I sought. This neighborhood was full of houses and local businesses, but much smaller than any I’d seen before. Like skinny rectangles, they sat very close to one another on the long street. This part of town wasn’t a good one, that was obvious, and more scents that I didn’t want to think about tried to invade my head.

They weren’t important. The ones that were…

My eyes dropped to a dark sided house, the porch light casting shadows down the yard and nearly to my feet.

The screams were gone, but something worse remained.

The overwhelming smell of *blood.*

I started to run again, my strides long as I covered the short walk from the street to the yard, and I vaulted onto the porch in one motion.

The door was ajar. I slammed it back on its hinges, the smell of blood and magic that was *wrong* very strong in this place.

The only light seemed to come from deeper inside the house, but I wasn’t so stupid as to barge right in.

She could be dying! The panicked part of my brain urged, but I shook my head and walked slowly through the sparsely decorated living room, turning left to head down a thin hallway. I didn't want to call out, on the off-chance this was a trap.

Two doors lay at my left, both mostly closed. Neither of them were what I needed, though.

No, I was headed straight for the end of the hallway, where a door was ajar and throwing lurid orange light into the hall.

"It's now or never, George," I breathed, my steps slowing deliberately near the door.

It hit me very hard that I was alone. No magical Aveline at my back. No Yuna. No trio.

No one.

Would it be too much to hope that Merric would show his face again?

Definitely too much to hope for. The day I started to expect his assistance would be the day I'd come to regret it, I was sure.

My hand was trembling as I reached out to grasp the brass knob.

Slowly I pushed the door open, giving it a nudge so it swung back without my hand on it.

The scene in the bedroom made me choke and swallow back bile. I couldn't look at it all at once, so I dropped my eyes to the floor where drops of blood had soaked into the carpet near my feet.

I could do this. I *had* to do this. What if whoever was there was still alive?

Deep down, I knew that wasn't the case. I heard no breathing from within, nor any movement.

Whoever lay on the other side of the doorway in front of me was dead.

I sucked in a deep breath and immediately regretted it. Covering my mouth and nose, I finally stepped into the room, lifting my gaze in increments to take in a bit at a time.

Candles. There were lit candles on the floor, their thick white wax seeping into the carpet.

Herbs rested on the floor in-between the candles, disappearing somewhere behind the open door.

Was that a bone?

I really hoped those were not bones.

At last, my eyes landed on what I knew had been here all along.

Long, black hair lay in a puddle at my feet. My gaze kept going, landing finally on the woman's forehead. Then her unseeing dark eyes.

I needed to *know.*

At once I jerked my chin up, taking in the entire scene in front of me.

There were runes on the floor, and something long that looked like a rubber hose.

I reached for it, confused, then shuddered when my fingers met scales.

It was a dead snake with scales as black as the woman's hair.

Pulling back, I focused on the woman whose screams I'd followed too slowly.

Her lips were parted, and she seemed to stare at something over my head. I looked up, seeing nothing, and then back down at her.

The rest of her was the hard thing to look at.

Someone or some*thing* had cut her open, and it looked like they'd stuck their hands into her ribcage and *pulled* until her chest cavity split open and they could pick at what was inside.

Picturing it made my stomach turn with nausea.

My hands shook as I lifted them, trying to figure out just what to do other than clench and unclench my fingers.

Tentatively, because I had to, I sniffed.

Her magic was here. It held none of that burned smell that Yvenson's had, and I could scent it very clearly.

But hadn't the Loa said the bodies had been checked for their magic being stolen?

Hers was here, exactly where it belonged.

My eyes caught sight of a small bag at her throat. A gris-gris, like Yvenson had worn. This one was surrounded by brown feathers on the leather strap, and I knelt to grab for it.

Big mistake.

My knee sank into the white carpet under me like a sponge, *squelching* as it did.

Fresh blood seeped to the surface, and through my leggings, I felt the uncomfortable sensation of blood on my skin.

"Oh *fuck*," I gasped, trying to get my stomach under control.

It wasn't happening.

As quickly as I could, I reached into the little bag at her neck, extracting a small stone similar to the first. Once I had it and the bag was closed once

more, I stumbled to my feet and *ran.*

I made it outside, thankfully, before my stomach ejected its contents onto the small lawn. My hands shook as I knelt here, teeth chattering in between heaving.

Goddess, I was so glad no one I knew was here.

My phone rang, but I ignored it. No matter who was trying to call me, this was definitely a bad time.

When my stomach was completely empty, I stood. No one had bothered to come out, and I was glad for that.

I didn't need anyone knowing I was here.

My fingers itched to call the police, to call anyone, but I didn't have Nathanial's number. Nor the Loa's. No one that I knew would be able to do anything here except maybe vomit like I had.

It seemed that my only option was to *leave.*

My phone rang again as I walked away from the murder house behind me, still feeling shaky. I hadn't known her, but I hated that I was too late to help her.

Not to mention, I needed to know who she'd been. Quickly I snapped a picture of the house on my phone, making sure to get the mailbox and address when I did.

Now I could finally look at who I'd been missing calls from.

Yuna.

Sorry, I texted, my fingers flying over the screen as I walked. *It's been a shitty night. Can I call you in the morning?*

Yes, she replied after barely any time. *Are you all right?*

Was I all right?

I cast a look around the street, sure I was going to see something trying to reach out and grab me.

But there was nothing here. The scent of black magic was fading, and I was getting further and further from the house.

I was alone.

I'm fine, I lied, wishing she was here. Not just for protection or assistance. But because I wanted *her* here. Yuna, who didn't bat an eye at anything. I was sure she wouldn't have gotten sick at the house. She probably would've noticed anything I'd missed, and might've known what to do.

I barely knew where I was.

Are you sure? The cecaelia prodded.

I stared at the message, thinking of all the things I could say and how to phrase them.

Then, finally, I typed out two words.

I'm sure.

She didn't ask again, and I was relieved. I didn't know how to explain this night to her just yet.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

The sound of a vehicle I did not recognize met my ears as I languished on the sofa, content to suffer under the full moon.

There was someone in my driveway.

Which was unexpected, unplanned, and unwelcome. With the full moon making itself very known over the roof of the house I shared with Aveline, I had made sure to clear my schedule liberally beforehand.

My cousin was gone, at a party she'd been talking about all day, and I was alone in the house, as I'd wanted. While she'd wanted to stay and had offered to watch a movie or ten with me, I had insisted she go.

The full moon made me edgy. It made me intense in a not-always pleasant way.

I wouldn't kill anyone, but there was no reason to subject the people I cared about to my intense emotions and mood swings.

So why in the Goddess's name was someone revving their engine in my driveway?

I pinched the bridge of my nose, willing the person to go away. Couldn't they leave me to stare at my dark ceiling and maybe binge *Little Children, Large Crowns?*

The horn of the car honked.

What the *hell?*

Throwing my legs off the sofa, I got to my feet and walked through the living room. The only light came from the kitchen nightlight, though my eyes had no trouble seeing in the dark.

I yanked the door open, poking my head out to look at the people who had the audacity to make a scene in my driveway.

And found two *very* familiar faces.

The light from Yuna's silver car was more than enough to illuminate the two people who stood against it, both of them leaning against the driver's side.

"What are you two doing here?" I asked the cecaelia and her unlikely companion.

Merric was with her.

"You weren't doing anything," Merric shrugged, smiling that sweet smile while his twin orange tails writhed behind him. "We thought you'd want to come with us."

"*We*?" I repeated. "Is this the royal *We*, or is there a fox-octopus alliance brewing on the western front?"

"He shows up sometimes," Yuna shrugged. "And I haven't found out the secret to banishing him for good. It's a shame he doesn't do it around water." The woman addressed the last bit of it towards the kitsune, who grinned.

"Oh, Yuna. You like me too much to drown me. I know it. You know it. I'm like a barnacle you just can't get rid of."

"That's all well and good," I interrupted, shifting from foot to foot and glancing up at the full moon above me. Outside I could *feel* its light, and tonight the sky was cloudless. I had no buffer between me and that giant beacon in the sky that called to my wolf with the utmost urgency. "But what are you guys doing *here*?"

"We've come to get you. There's no reason not to spend time with us, is there?" Yuna asked. "And if it's a murderous rampage you're afraid of, no one will miss the fox."

Merric squawked indignantly and hit her lightly with his tails. She only glanced at him with one raised brow.

"I'm not really dressed to go out in public," I argued. "And uh, not really in the mood. Not sure people want to be growled at by the angry half-werewolf from down the lane."

"That's why I thought we'd go to my house," Yuna offered.

I inhaled sharply. My blue eyes narrowed. "That's not fair," I pointed out, folding my arms over my chest. "That is absolutely not fair." She knew how much I wanted to see where she lived, if just to see if she really *did* live underwater full time.

Though honestly, the silver Porsche behind her made me pretty certain she didn't just hop into the water at night and go to sleep.

"It is," Yuna agreed. "But honestly, George." Her grin was full of mischief. "*I'm* not very fair."

I wavered, considering my options. Being with them really would be better than hanging out here on my own. And they knew about me. They obviously knew about my Full Moon Moods.

Plus, it was Yuna and Merric. How much could I really hurt their feelings if I did say something without thinking?

"All right," I relented. "I just need to change first and get my stuff."

"You look fine to me," Merric commented.

"I look like I'm going to bed." I gestured to my black pajama shorts with paw prints on them and too big t-shirt.

"You look fine to me as well," Yuna said. She, of course, looked like a model ready for any passing camera in her tight jeans, snug shirt, and hair up in an artfully messy bun.

I lifted my hands in surrender. "May I at *least* go get my phone and lock the door?" I asked finally.

"I can help," the kitsune offered, pushing off the side of the car.

"No," I told him flatly. "Thank you, but I'll only be a few seconds."

Yuna made a shooing motion at me with her fingers that had me striding back inside. Like a tornado, I moved around the house, grabbing my keys, my phone, and my pill case from the bathroom. For a visit, this was all I needed.

Though, part of me still wanted to change into something a bit nicer than my pajamas.

I fought the urge with a sigh, looking longingly towards my room as I backtracked to the door.

The door. My mortal enemy.

While I was doing better now that I was older and not afraid of my own shadow, locking the door was still an irritating ritual when I was alone. Call me paranoid, but if I didn't check the lock at least eighty times, it was *obviously* going to swing open of its own accord.

And now Yuna and Merric were going to have front row seats to that little show.

My stomach clenched, trying to turn itself over as I slid my flip-flops on.

A moment later I was outside, closing the door and turning the key in the lock until it clicked.

Letting out a breath, I turned the door handle. It was locked. Obviously. So I did it again.

Uncomfortably aware of the other two waiting for me, I felt my ears lower against my hair, my tail tucked against my thigh.

Well, if that wasn't a neon, blaring sign, nothing else was.

Hands shooed mine away, and I looked up in surprise to see Merric beside me. He glanced sidelong at me with eyes that gleamed yellow and twisted the door handle.

"It's locked," he announced, tugging me off the porch and towards Yuna's car.

"Thanks," I murmured, but he didn't answer.

"Foxes *still* sit in the back," Yuna reminded him, pointing to the back seat.

"That's so mean," he told her. "And it makes me think you don't like me."

"I don't think she likes you," I agreed with a nod.

"Tell you what." Yuna smiled at him. "If I ever find you bleeding out, almost dead, with your tails having been cut off, I'll let you sit in the front. Okay?"

Merric sighed loudly but opened the back door to her Porsche, sliding in with a hand still on my arm.

Yuna caught his hand, looking unimpressed.

"Pretty girls sit in the front," she said to both of us.

"You think I'm pretty?" I smiled, going to the passenger door and opening it to slide into the front seat.

"If I didn't think you were pretty, I wouldn't be here," she replied.

Well. That was probably true.

Her car smelled cleaner than mine ever had, with that new-car-scent that people craved. The interior was obviously leather, and a very soft black. Everything was immaculate, like she'd just driven it off the test lot.

"Is this your car?" I asked before I could think not to as Yuna turned the key in the ignition.

"No, George," the cecaelia sighed. "Merric and I stole it and massacred the humans at the dealership on our way out." When I just gazed at her,

unsure if she was joking, she rolled her eyes and a very small smile played at her lips. “Of course it is. I bought it last year.”

“Good job not getting blood on it during your raid,” I complimented. “It smells *new*. And it’s so clean.”

What was it with my friends having very fancy cars?

With that thought, I turned to Merric, who blinked at my sudden glare. “What do you drive?”

“Why do you ask?” He replied, a question for a question, because of course he could never be easy about anything.

“Curiosity,” I replied, my ears pricked.

“I don’t have a car,” Merric shrugged. “I don’t really need one.”

My shoulders fell slightly. I’d definitely been expecting him to say he drove a Lamborghini or whatever the car had been that James Bond drove in the movies.

“Since I have a BMW 1600 GT,” he finished.

“You have a…what?” I asked politely.

“I never really liked the 1600,” Yuna remarked as she pulled out of my driveway.

“Not even in the pretty space blue?” Merric looked surprised. “I thought that would’ve been your thing.”

“Are we talking about a car?” I was very close to just looking it up on my phone, and my tail curled over my thigh.

“We’re talking about a motorcycle,” Merric explained.

“The Harley Davidson kind, or Trinity in the Matrix kind?” I wasn’t sure what the latter was actually called.

“Trinity kind,” Merric assured me. “I don’t think I look good on a Harley.”

Personally, I couldn’t picture him on a motorcycle at all. I knew part of it was that his fragile, youthful facade was so believable. Kudos to him on that.

Which brought another question to mind.

When I looked back at him again, he was prepared, and already meeting my eyes with his.

“George, if you don’t stop looking at me, I might have to think you’re attracted to me,” he said patiently.

“Sure you will,” I frowned at him, gripping my phone in my hands. “Can I ask you something?”

“A question or a favor?”

“It’d better be a question he already wants to answer,” Yuna said mildly, glancing at him in the mirror. “I’ve already told you, I don’t allow you making deals with George in my car.”

“You did?” I turned back to look at her.

“Yes. When he got in tonight, I told him there were ground rules to spending time with us.”

“Ground rules,” I repeated, unsure how to feel. I licked over my canines thoughtfully. Was it because she didn’t trust me? Maybe she felt the need to *protect* me?

I hated that possibility, and swallowed back a displeased growl.

It’s just the full moon, George, I reminded myself.

“Yeah, she says I get too arrogant or something,” Merric shrugged. “I don’t know, Yuna. If you look at me and you’re inspired to violence, maybe that’s a *you* thing, and not a me thing.”

“It’s a you thing,” the cecaelia promised, pulling out onto the interstate.

“First things first,” I interrupted. “I just wanted to ask if that’s what you actually look like,” I gestured to the kitsune.

“Why no, George. This is what the humans call a fancy disguise.”

“No shit. I meant when you’re *not* wearing that fancy disguise around like a shitty toupee. The white tails, the yellow eyes. Is *that* what you really look like?”

He stared at me. When I blinked, he was suddenly sitting there in the exact form I’d been speaking of. Dark, tousled hair, white tails that took over the entire back of the car, white ears, yellow eyes, and dark circles that made it seem like he hadn’t slept in weeks.

I wouldn’t say it, but he *was* attractive to me in this form. Maybe I had a thing for it, but he seemed dangerous. Like a threat or a promise waiting to wrap me up in his tails and pull me into a mirror.

Blinking, I sat a bit straighter. I’d never really let myself actualize that thought to myself, and I was a bit concerned at where that line of thinking might take me.

It was a damn good thing he wasn’t attracted to me. Otherwise, I’d probably go right along with whatever he wanted to do. Especially tonight, when he looked positively sinful lounging in the back of Yuna’s Porsche with his soft tails on display.

“This is it,” Merric spread his hands theatrically. “This is the whole package. I am so very sorry I don’t look like Cian.”

I was so a fan of the whole package.

“You don’t need to,” I said. “Unless this is your way of saying you *like* the way he looks?” I wiggled my brows, prompting him to snort.

“Get real. So, why are you asking?” He let one of his tails trail against my hand. I didn’t pull away from the soft, white fur.

“I just didn’t know. There isn’t a reason,” I promised. “It’s hard to tell what’s real when you don’t want me to see.” I shrugged one shoulder, ignoring the way he still looked suspicious.

“If you say so,” he said, sitting back in his seat. I noticed, but didn’t comment, on the fact that he maintained his white furred, nine-tailed form instead of switching back to the ruse.

I liked it when he didn’t hide from me.

“So. Ground rules?” I rested my chin on my hand and looked at Yuna with a half-smile. “What are they? I don’t want to break any myself.”

Yuna glanced my way. “Rule one. No making deals with foxes in my car.”

“Yeah, you’ve said that.”

“Rule two. No asking the fox *Loaded questions* in my car without running it by me first.”

“How am I supposed to run it by you without him hearing?” I asked.

“I second that,” Merric added, leaning between the seats. “I do have very good hearing, you know.”

“Get creative,” the sea witch replied soberly. “Because breaking my car rules means you get punished.”

My heart fluttered. ‘Getting punished’ probably had a much different meaning to me than it did to her. Goddess, I wanted her to punish me. “Don’t make promises you don’t want to keep, Yuna,” I said. “Because I might be tempted to get Merric to break a rule so I can see him get punished by your gentle mercies.” More likely, *I’d* be the one doing bad things to get punished. On purpose.

If she scowled any harder, I feared her mouth would get stuck like that.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

I couldn't help gasping, my lips parted in surprise at the sight of Yuna's house.

To the front of her house, on the north side, was Breakwater park, and off of its shore lay Lake Pontchartrain. The wet air curled around me, heavy with the smells of people and fish.

I couldn't help but stare at the reflection of the moonlight on the water, even with the buzz of street lamps assaulting my sensitive ears.

Yuna's white-sided boathouse sat back from the street, and the overhang allowed her to park her Porsche comfortably.

"There's a boat slip on the other side, under where I actually live," she explained. "That's why it's raised. And you know, my house is over water and all." She gestured for us to follow and lead us up a flight of stairs that put us on the dark wood balcony we'd parked under.

Even Merric looked a little impressed.

"I think you should let me move in," he announced, his tails brushing and curling around my bare thigh. He didn't even glance my way, as if he didn't notice the tingles it sent up my spine when his luxurious fur slid against my skin.

Yuna noticed. She looked at me, then pointedly at him until he smirked and pulled his tails back.

"You aren't moving in," she promised him. "I'd kill you before the week was out."

"Always so rude." He put a hand over his heart and walked past her when she pulled the heavy, dark blue door open.

“I won’t ask to move in, but I *will* demand sleepovers,” I told her, walking in myself.

The air in here was cool and clean. Her house smelled of gentle incense, and was very kind to my canine senses.

She came in right behind me, one hand sliding around my waist. “I’m not sure we’d be doing much sleeping,” the cecaelia remarked offhandedly, her fingertips brushing the skin of my hip and sending tingles up my spine.

I was used to her touching me in public. She’d kissed me a few times after our lunch dates and had reached out to brush my hand or arm casually, but this was very, *very* different. Here, under a full moon and in her house, it felt much more intimate than it ever had on our dates.

“I wouldn’t complain,” I remarked, giving her a sidelong glance that she returned.

“I’m gonna vomit,” Merric said, looking at us with a sweet smile.

“Why? I thought you wanted to watch?” I stepped forward when Yuna let go, my eyes traveling over the interior of her house.

This room was mostly open, with a kitchen and small dining area to the left, and sofas in the room closer to the glass doors and windows.

I kicked my shoes off, the cold marble against my feet a surprise. The whole floor seemed to be solid marble, with beige marble on the countertops that was only a few shades darker than that of the floor.

The furniture in the living room area looked incredibly expensive. All of it was shiny-black, the look of new leather. The tables even had black marble tops to match.

I was afraid to touch anything. Like this was a designer house I was merely touring.

“Why don’t I want to watch you two being utterly inappropriate together?” Merric repeated, blinking. His brow furrowed, the look on his face one I’d never seen before.

Almost like he didn’t know the answer himself.

When he caught me looking, his face morphed into a smirk. “Because I’m too *pure*,” he laughed.

Yuna eyed him as she walked by, beckoning me towards her while Merric kicked off his shoes.

“You can look around,” she said to both of us. “And nothing is going to break just by you touching it, George. So. *Sit.*” She pointed at the black sofa nearest her.

“Well that’s a little demanding, but okay,” I said, the command prickling at me slightly.

Though, I wasn’t sure if that prickle was insubordination or the desire for her to do more than just tell me to *sit.*

I went anyway, sitting on the black sofa. It was definitely leather, and I was sure my ass would be sticking to it later when I tried to get up.

Merric sat beside me while I stared up at the large fan above us. It spun lazily, the crystal dome in the middle shaking at the motion while it cast a soft light.

“Now tell me why you didn’t explain to me about the body you found last night,” Yuna demanded, pulling me out of my admiration.

“*What*?” I asked, my voice a yelp. “How did you…” I broke off, my head slowly turning until I could look at the kitsune.

He only smiled.

“You have *got* to stop following me,” I warned.

“And you have got to stop thinking you can tell me what to do.” His yellow eyes were just a little bit dangerous. “The world doesn’t revolve around you, George. I wasn’t following *you*. But you did show up.”

“Show up…” I blinked. “Were you there? At the house?”

He nodded.

“Were you there before me?”

“I was.”

“Are you *joking*?” I leaped to my feet, the leather clinging to my skin just as I’d expected.

Yuna stepped back, obviously having not expected my outburst as I whirled on Merric.

It was unfortunate for him that we were having this chat on the full moon, but I would’ve been irritated regardless.

“Were you there *before that woman died?”* I outright demanded, leaning close to him.

Merric settled back on the sofa. “You probably should work on that full moon moodiness you’ve got going,” he said.

Was his smile losing its humorous edge just slightly? Or was it just me?

“You could’ve saved her!” I wasn’t having it tonight. Not when my emotions were revving to go at the flip of a switch.

Merric traded a glance with Yuna and got to his feet.

The cecaelia sighed, leaning back against a side table, but gave no sign of stepping in.

“Careful, George,” the kitsune warned. “This is feeling a bit unfriendly to me.”

“Answer me,” I said quietly. “Were you there *before* she was dead?”

He crossed his arms over his chest lazily. “I was.”

“Then *why didn’t you do something*?”

“Because I won’t make any more exceptions.”

That caught me off guard. I didn’t understand his words, and they didn’t seem to answer my question. “Exceptions?” I demanded.

“I’m sure you know what the word means. You’re my one *exception*. I don’t make a habit of interfering.”

“But you could’ve saved-“

“Do you know what I *am?”*

The question was confusing. I looked at Yuna, who only watched me with interest.

“Well…yes. Of course I do. You’re a kitsune,” I answered.

“I am. Very good.” He stepped towards me, but I held my ground. We were very nearly the same height, but he didn’t need Cian’s stature to be intimidating. “But let’s be more specific. What *kind* of kitsune did I say I was?”

“Cian said you were a chaos fox,” I said uncertainly.

“And *I* told you clear as day that I am a *Void kitsune*,” I wasn’t sure if it was the mention of Cian, but that smile fell just a bit more, and the amusement drained from his face.

“So? I don’t understand what that has to do with you not helping her.”

“You have no right to be mad at her,” Yuna said from behind me. “When you’ve been aware all along how little she knows about what you *are*.”

“I would think the cecaelia who hasn’t even taken her *near* the water doesn’t have much room to talk,” the kitsune replied.

“Why does it matter if she takes me near the water?” I asked, confused. “I *know* what she is.”

They looked at each other for a few seconds, until I was afraid they might actually fight. Finally, Merric sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Oh, very well. You’re right. But put your hackles down, George, or I’ll just be too frightened to spit it out,” Merric said.

I blinked, sighing and unclenching my hands at my sides. “I don’t understand,” I agreed. “But I want to.” I would’ve been better having this conversation in the morning. “Will you please explain?”

“Kitsune thrive off of their element. I’ve watched a fire kitsune lay in a bonfire, and a thunder kitsune purposefully get struck by lightning. It gives us power. *Chaos* gives me power. Pain, strife, and everything not-nice. I’m drawn to it, like they’re drawn to their elements. If I would’ve helped her, I would’ve had nothing to feed on. It is simply not in my nature to help, you see?”

“You help me,” I disagreed.

“I make exception to you. There’s a difference.” Merric’s good humor was slowly returning. I wondered what he was like when he wasn’t playing at his constant amusement.

“Which brings us back to *my* question.” Yuna rounded on me. “Why didn’t you tell me when I asked?”

“Because…I don’t like dragging you guys into my problems,” I admitted, sitting back down when Merric did the same. My ruffled feathers were mostly unruffled now, and I didn’t mind the press of fur against my leg.

Succinctly I explained the night’s events to them both. “I wasn’t looking for it,” I promised when I’d wrapped up. “Not exactly. But I do need to try to help. I need to figure out what’s going on, and I’m not sure how to do that.”

They traded looks. Merric grimaced.

“Ask us next time,” Yuna pressed. “I’ll show up to help. I don’t have your nose, but I also won’t let something attack you from the shadows unseen.”

“That’s totally a dig at me,” the kitsune sighed heavily. “You can call me too,” he said after a moment’s consideration. “Honestly, I’ll probably already be there.”

“Is that why you showed up at the Loa’s home?” I asked.

He glanced quickly to me, then away. “Yeah,” he said. “Something like that.”

After that, Yuna assuaged my worry of us having an all-night battle planning session by asking what we wanted to order. Soon enough, the three of us were out on her patio, overlooking the lake with too much pizza between us.

I couldn’t help considering how different it was, compared to the time I spent with the troublesome trio. Whereas it was intense and constant teasing with Cian and the others, here it felt somewhat softer.

Even *with* Merric.

It wasn’t like I preferred one over the other. The five of them meant a lot to me.

Even Merric.

“I guess I should go,” the kitsune grumped, getting to his feet when my phone showed the time to be nearly one in the morning. “I *still* have to find something to wear for the gala, and it’s only three days away.”

“The gala?” I repeated. “I think my boss is going to that. How did *you* get an invitation?”

“She did too, I bet,” Merric accused, pointing at Yuna.

“But unlike you, I know what I’ll wear,” Yuna looked at me. “You aren’t going?”

“I wasn’t invited.”

They both traded a glance.

“Your vampire is going,” Yuna went on. “Along with the other two.”

Great. Now I really felt like the unimportant one.

Jealousy gnawed at my stomach, and I bit my lip. “How did you guys get an invitation?”

“You just…get one,” Merric shrugged. “The North American council sets the whole thing up, and they just invite people they want to invite. But don’t worry about it. Seriously, it won’t be any fun.”

“It’ll be awful,” Yuna agreed. “If they were having it somewhere other than here, I wouldn’t even go.”

“Same,” the kitsune agreed. “But the council informed me personally I had no reason not to.”

I really hated feeling so left out. At least I’d have Aveline, but this was one more thing to remind me just how dissimilar I was to my five friends.

“Don’t feel bad, George,” Merric insisted. “It really, *really* won’t be a good time. It’ll be *hours* of us trying to leave, I promise.”

“I don’t feel bad,” I lied. “I promise. I didn’t even know about it until the other day.”

And besides, I *wasn’t invited.*

“Then I’m going to go prepare for my outfit hunting,” Merric sighed heavily.

“I’ll see you–“ I glanced up, but Merric was already gone. Disappeared, as if he hadn’t really been here in the first place.

“He just likes it when he catches you off guard,” Yuna observed. “I hope you don’t blame him for what he said. He really can’t go against his nature.”

“But he does with me,” I pointed out, drawing my legs up under me.

Yuna shrugged one shoulder. “Guess you’re his special case.” She blinked, her gaze sliding from me to the water under us. Outside her glass doors, the balcony lay perched over the small inlet the houses shared. She’d told us her boat was under the floor where she and I sat now. “Are you afraid of the water?” Yuna asked suddenly.

“No,” I replied. “And if this is going into a tangent about being afraid of *you*–“

“He was right about one thing,” the cecaelia said, shifting on the dark blue chair she sat on. “I should take you to the water. You should know what I am too.”

“I know what you are,” I reminded her, scooting along the couch until I could sit beside her. I leaned on her, smiling at the black-haired woman. “Octo-mermaid-kinda, right? With a sword. And amazing powers in the water.”

Bright teal eyes blinked down at me. “Let’s go out on the lake,” she suggested.

“You want to go swimming at one in the morning?” I clarified. The night wasn’t cold, but I hadn’t been expecting her to want to go *swimming.*

“I want to go boating at one am,” she replied. “There’s a very radical difference.”

“Sure…okay?” I let her lead me downstairs, this time to the boat slip that lay under the balcony.

Even her boat was more impressive than I’d expected. She pulled the tarp off of it, unveiling a speedboat almost twenty-five feet long.

While most of it was painted a very shiny white, dark blue stripes had been painted on each side.

“Holy shit,” I announced, walking around on the fLoating dock that bobbed slightly under my feet and made my toes curl against the wood.

“Oh…” I glanced down, aware that I still wore my pajamas and no shoes. “Should I go get my shoes? Or…something?”

“We won’t be out that long,” Yuna promised. “If you get cold, I have blankets.” To demonstrate her point, she lifted the top on one of the storage boxes tucked against the inside of the boat. Sure enough, I saw the telltale fluffiness of a blanket there.

Letting my gaze drift as she settled into the driver’s seat, I was very tempted to lie on the prow of the speedboat like some weirdo in a movie.

But I wasn’t sure that was even safe, given my unfamiliarity with being on a boat.

Instead, I settled for sitting on the L-shaped bench behind both seats.

Yuna looked at me, bemused. “You can sit wherever you want.”

“Can I drape myself across the little railings on the front? And pose?” I asked with a grin.

She snorted. “I take it back. Stay right there.”

She flipped a few more switches, looking completely at ease with what she was doing and very comfortable in the vinyl seat.

But of course she was. Water was her thing, after all. She guided the boat out of the dock effortlessly, the motor smooth and quieter than I’d expected. I crossed my legs under me, thankful for the warm night as I watched the houses go by.

After only a few minutes, we were at the open water, and she pushed a lever upward slowly, increasing our speed.

The wind whistled in my ears, and I was very glad that my hair was up in a bun instead of loose. The last thing I needed tonight was hair in my eyes and mouth.

As always with the full moon, the light seemed to almost pulse against me, in the same way the heat from the sun would.

Only this was pure magic. I allowed myself to gaze up at the moon for a few minutes, eyes wide as I sat there, entranced.

You have better things to look at, George, I chided, dropping my gaze to Yuna again. The air seemed colder this far out, and I gave a small shiver.

Then I blinked, looking at our surroundings.

There was nothing. No islands, houses, or even the park. Only water, as far as I could see.

How far were we going?

My stomach did small, nervous flips as I sat up on my knees to watch the lake go by around us. Yuna didn’t falter and seemed to know exactly where she was headed.

Finally, when the need to ask overwhelmed me, I opened my mouth to call out the question to her of where in the world we were headed.

I didn't get the chance. Yuna slowly eased the lever back down until the boat came to a relative stop. Now we drifted on the black water, listening to the sound of waves lapping against the sides.

"It's very dark," I commented, rising to sit on the back of the boat so I could see better. "Where are we?"

"We're about six miles out or so from my house," Yuna replied easily. "This lake isn't *that* deep. Only fourteen feet or so, and that's here, where it's deepest."

She turned to look at me with ocean-colored eyes that glowed as brightly as the moon.

"What are we doing out here?" My voice was eerily loud in the silence. It really was just her, me, the water, and the moon. Nothing else stirred, and the only light came from the sky.

She took a breath, then released it slowly. "I need to show you what I am, so you can decide for yourself if you want to continue with this," she said slowly.

"Yuna…" I frowned, getting to my feet on the scratchy carpet. I stepped forward shakily on the rocking boat, reaching out to touch the taller woman's hip lightly. "I *know* what you are. It doesn't bother me."

She smiled ruefully. "There's a difference in reading it on google and seeing it with your own eyes." She tugged on my hand and stepped onto the prow, barefoot as well.

I followed, stepping up and onto the prow with her. "There's no difference," I assured her. "Short of you drowning *me*, I don't care about whatever it is you think I'll judge you for." It was frustrating that she didn't believe me, and I didn't know how to prove that to her.

Her eyes found mine. Bright and almost too-intense. "All right," she breathed. "If you're sure."

Did that mean we were going back to her house? Was this all just for that statement?

"Do you trust me?"

Her question caught me off guard.

Did I?

Of course I did. She'd had time to kill me before. She'd *saved* me, and put her own life at risk. She'd been understanding of my other relationships,

and had even encouraged them. She'd also never let me down thus far.

"I trust you," I breathed, barely hesitating.

Her eyes not leaving mine, she stripped off her shirt and unbuttoned her jeans, leaving both in a pile on the prow. My heart did strange flips in my chest as my lips parted slightly.

We'd never gone past making out. This was certainly a big step I hadn't been expecting.

And she didn't stop there. The cecaelia continued to watch me as she slid her bra off of her shoulders, leaving it unceremoniously in the pile at our feet. I would've expected her to joke or tease or *something*, but it almost seemed hasty.

A second later, she stood in front of me completely naked.

"Oh *wow*–Goddess, I–" I stammered, unsure of what to say. "Yuna, I'm….I've needed to tell you this for a bit, but I've never gone….this far with another woman."

She leveled her gaze at me again, looking at me with something like deadpan surprise.

"Of course that's where your mind goes," Yuna sighed. She pressed her hands to her hips, and I fought not to stare.

"Well. Yeah," I agreed. "Where *else* was it going to go? You just stripped."

"Because I'm getting in the water," the cecaelia explained. She stepped back, both feet balancing precariously on the railing. When I looked back up at her face, she was staring at me challengingly. "I hope you mean what you say," Yuna murmured.

Then she fell backward into the water and out of my sight.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

After the ripples faded from where Yuna had dove into the water, everything was absolutely silent.

The moon still beat down on me like a silver sun, but I barely noticed it as my eyes stayed fixed on the inky blackness of the lake.

What in the world was I supposed to do now? Follow her into the lake?

I wasn't a great swimmer, truth be told.

On the other hand, I didn't want her to think I didn't care. Or, worse, that I was afraid of her.

Thankfully, Yuna made the decision for me. She resurfaced, her hands gripping the prow as she lifted herself half onto the boat.

But she was different. My eyes caught the tips of needle-sharp fangs, making me draw in a breath. Her eyes, still the teal of the ocean, had taken on a bright glow. Even her porcelain skin struck me as being almost white.

Though, perhaps her ethereal look was in part due to the moonlight that painted her in a gorgeous and deadly light.

She was terrifying, and the sight of what was clearly a predator waiting to draw me into the depths should have terrified me.

But it didn't. Not in the least.

I couldn't see anything lower than her stomach, with her hands pressed to the floor of the boat to hold her up.

"Come over here," she ordered, though the words weren't as sure and brusque as normal. She sounded worried. Like she was afraid of my reaction.

I approached her without hesitation, kneeling down at the side of the boat and trying to see more of her body.

In the inky blackness of the lake, however, I couldn’t see more than movement.

“I still can’t really see you,” I told her, dropping down to my knees on the carpeted bottom of the boat. Where we sat, there was only a decorative railing a few inches off the floor of the boat, and beyond that was the open water and Yuna.

“I know,” she admitted, reaching up to push my hair back from my face.

“Then show me,” I whispered, reaching out and twining my fingers with hers before she pulled away. “I won’t run away, Yuna. I’m not afraid of you.”

But there was something in her face I’d never seen before.

She wasn’t sure. She didn’t know that I meant what I said and that she really couldn’t scare me away with whatever kind of shape she was hiding.

“You weren’t far off when you started comparing me to Ursula.” As I watched, an appendage like an octopus’s arm lifted from the water behind her, then another. They fell back gently, her lower body a velvety black even in the moonlight.

“Will you sing to me too? And steal my voice?” I teased, my stomach unclenching considerably. By the way she played it up, I had thought it would be something much harder to swallow.

But octopus arms? I could more than live with that.

“I might steal your breath,” Yuna shrugged. Her eyes darkened just enough that I could see. “Lean over. Look again. I want you to really understand, not just see a little and think you understand the sum of me.”

“You can’t scare me away,” I repeated, crawling towards her until my knees found the edge of the boat.. I did as she bid, leaning as far out as I dared to see her lower half. “Show me again. This railing hurts like a bitch–“

The cecaelia surged upward against the side of the boat, wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing her lips urgently to mine.

I gasped, giving her the opportunity to slide her tongue past mine.

When I tried to return the gesture, her sharp fangs pricked my lips and my tongue, making me shiver at the coppery tang that spread over my tongue.

Then, she was pulling gently at my shoulders, urging me further and further over until–

“*Wait!*” I gasped into her mouth, already too far over to save myself. My muscles clenched, and I grabbed at her arms. “Yuna, wait–“

“Trust me,” she breathed, and promptly dragged me under the water.

It was cold. So very, very cold. Her arms kept me pressed against her, and as soon as we were under-and going lower-her mouth began to devour mine in earnest, pressed so hard to me that no water could seep into our kiss. My legs brushed against her lower body, her new limbs wrapping around my calves to keep me from struggling.

Would she drown me?

No. I couldn’t-wouldn’t believe she’d do that. Why wait so long, if that was her plan all along.

But my arms trembled, and my lungs had started to burn.

“Just breathe,” Yuna murmured in my ear, her voice containing an eerie quality under the water.

I wasn’t a fish. I couldn’t breathe while submerged.

“Breathe, George,” she urged.

Like an idiot, I opened my mouth and gasped, if only to do something about my burning lungs.

And, to my utter surprise, did not begin to drown.

My eyes snapped open as I sucked in…air? Water filled my mouth, cold on my tongue and against my skin, but when I inhaled, I got pure oxygen.

And I could see.

Not the dark, blurred shapes of what under the water normally looked like. No, now I saw the landscape of the lake bottom illuminated, as if everything here glowed with an inner light.

“Wow…” I breathed, twisting in Yuna’s embrace to look around us. My voice held the same quality as hers when she’d spoken. As if our words were almost distorted by the water. “This is amazing. You’re doing this, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. “It’ll only last a few minutes or so, but I would never let you drown.”

I refocused on Yuna, pulling myself closer to her. She barely moved in the water, and somehow we were mostly still, hovering a few feet or so above the lake bed. “I told you I wouldn’t freak out,” Minus, of course, that split-second I’d thought I was drowning.

“No one has ever come through with their word,” she said matter-of-factly, as if she didn’t care. “Not even the other water folk care to be around

a cecaelia like me.”

“There are no cecaelia like *you*,” I argued, a small smile on my face. “Because you’re perfect.”

Her eyes lit up with surprise. “I should drag you underwater more often,” she said with a small hint of a smirk. “It makes me like you more when you’re in my territory, and in my embrace.”

“I won’t complain,” I told her, aware that the brightness of the lake was beginning to dim and the water in my mouth was feeling a bit less welcome. A touch of fear interrupted my enjoyment. Along with one of sadness. I’d never be able to stay here like she could. My time was limited in her world. “But Yuna…”

“I know.” She sighed, then surged upward in one smooth motion.

We broke the surface of the water and I gasped, my lungs grateful for less confusing oxygen than what I got at the bottom of the lake. We were beside the boat again, thankfully, and I reached out to press a hand against it, fumbling for the railing.

When I found it, I started to lever myself upward, hands slipping on the edge of the boat. Yuna caught me, easily helping me up and onto it. She followed a second later, managing to make it look graceful.

Only now, she was completely human, and completely naked.

My embarrassment from before came back threefold and Yuna turned in my direction as if she could sense it. Her eyes ran over my face, her grin turning wicked.

“You know, I could swear I heard you say something interesting before I went overboard,” the cecaelia breathed, pulling me to my feet.

“I’m sure you didn’t,” I denied with a nervous laugh. “I’m sure I didn’t say anything worth remembering.”

“Oh…I think you did. I think you said that you’d never gone this far with another woman, George.” She pulled me close, her arms encircling my neck as my body pressed lightly against hers.

With only my *wet* t-shirt and shorts on, the heat of her skin seemed to burn in a very delightful way that went straight to the apex of my thighs. I bit my lip, and her smile widened.

“I’m going to change that,” the cecaelia promised, and something about that statement and her tone of absolute certainty had me ready to pull off my clothes right in the middle of the lake.

I shivered, and unfortunately, it was only partially from arousal.

Her smile dropped slightly, a look of guilt replacing it. “You’re cold,” Yuna observed with a sigh. “I should’ve realized. Well, it can wait until we get back.”

TRUE TO HER WORD, YUNA HAD US BACK FASTER THAN THE RIDE OUT HAD taken. Once at her house, she’d directed me to the guest bathroom, telling me to take a hot shower and that she’d throw my clothes in the washer and dryer for me.

Only after I showered did it hit me that I had nothing to wear.

Was it an oversight on her part, I wondered? Or completely intentional.

“Well. Hope the neighbors can’t see in,” I told my wet-haired reflection in the foggy mirror. I had a red towel wrapped around me, but it only reached my upper thighs.

When I stepped out, barefoot, onto the tile floor, I saw that Yuna was already in the kitchen, throwing away our pizza boxes from earlier.

She wore a long t-shirt and panties, and when the bathroom door creaked open, she turned to look me over.

“I suppose I forgot you wouldn’t have any clothes if I took yours,” she mentioned, in a voice that made me very sure she hadn’t *forgotten* it.

“Guess I’m stuck here, only in a towel, until my clothes are done,” I sighed, batting my lashes at her.

“A tragedy,” the sea witch promised. She left the small kitchen and came to stand in front of me, running her fingers over the top edge of the towel. Heat flooded my body, and her gaze sharpened at my intake of breath. “Let’s go sit down,” she pulled me over to the sofa, her hand on my wrist.

I sat down beside her, noticing that she hit some button on a remote that had the lights in the room dimming.

“I hate to say it, Yuna, but you aren’t that subtle,” I told her with a mock apologetic tone.

Her grin was wolfish. “I never really counted subtlety as one of my qualities,” the cecaelia informed me. Before I registered her movements, she was very close to me on the sofa, her arm brushing mine. Yuna leaned forward and my heart sped up in my chest, my lips parting in expectation when she slid out of her t-shirt.

Until my phone rang to the dramatic tune of *Terror Time* from Scooby Doo, surprising both of us.

“That’s Indra,” I whispered, not moving away from her.

“Ignore him. He can have your attention some *other* time,” Yuna suggested.

I more than happily agreed. Her lips descended on mine, nipping and urging me to respond in kind.

My phone rang again.

We froze. Again.

Yuna sat back with a sigh and a roll of her teal eyes. “Men ruin everything,” she announced to the room.

“I’ll see what he wants and be done.” Reaching for my phone, I slid my thumb on the screen before it could go to voice mail again.

Goddess forbid, if he thought I was in actual danger, he might track me down.

“Hello?” I asked, leaning against the back of the couch.

“George?” His voice was worried. “Are you okay? You took awhile to answer.”

Looking at Yuna’s deadpan expression, I replied, “Yeah. Yep. I’m fine. Kind of busy, though.”

“Well, can it wait? I feel bad that we haven’t helped you out with this voodoo killer thing, and I think I might have some ideas for you. But I was hoping you could go over the details for me again, starting with the Loa.”

That would take *all night*.

“Umm.” I didn’t want to be rude to him, but Yuna was shifting impatiently at my side.

Not to mention, a girl had *needs.*

“Could we do this another time?” I said finally.

“Can you just try to go over some things with me again?” He pressed. “It won't take that long, and I have some things I want to run by Cian.”

“Okay…” I glanced at Yuna again. She watched me, a curious look on her face.

I wasn’t sure I liked that look.

“What do you need me to go over?”

“The Loa, for one. They didn’t say *anything* about this killer? Except to find him?” I was barely paying attention to him. I wanted to get off the damn phone more than anything else in my life.

My eyes landed on Yuna as he spoke. She stood in a graceful movement, her eyes intent. I'd expected irritation. Frustration, even, for brushing her off in favor of trying to politely get Indra off the phone.

But instead, her look was *predatory*. Our eyes met and my heart promptly skipped a beat or six.

Was that tightness in my chest lack of air, or barely withheld excitement?

Yuna loomed over me, arms crossed as she stood between me and the coffee table. I had to tip my head back to look up at her, and there was something hot about having her stand over me with *that look*.

Still not speaking, the Cecaelia reached down, tugging at the towel until she had pulled it from me completely. I swallowed a gasp, Indra's words a buzz in my ear as Yuna looked me over, my body completely naked to her.

I shivered. Did she notice that, or the way my lips parted so I could suck in some much needed oxygen? My thighs clenched tightly, the last barrier between her and all of me.

"George?" Indra's voice was puzzled. I'd almost forgotten about him, but *he was still there*. "Are you okay?"

Goddess, I needed to get him off the phone.

Giving Yuna what I hoped was a stern look of warning, I tried to laugh it off. "Sorry, Indra. I'm fine. Just-just dropped something is all. Yeah. So uh." I swallowed around a lump in my throat, my heart racing. "The Loa didn't give me that much on the subject. Voodoo killer. You know, guy killing…voodoo practitioners. Go find them. That was all." Could my tone with him be any shorter?

I could only watch with something between awe and trepidation as Yuna sank to her knees, her grip on my calves like iron as she pushed my unresisting legs apart.

She looked at me. *Really* looked at me, her eyes on mine as a slow, dangerous grin spread over her features. Did Indra hear my breath pick up?

If he did, he didn't mention it.

Yuna's mouth trailed along my inner thigh, making me tremble. My entire attention was caught by her actions, and the light brush of her kisses on my skin. Her hands moved, exploring the outside of both my thighs as they reached towards my lower back.

My breathing had definitely picked up now. There was no way for Indra *not* to notice. So had the urge to wiggle in my seat just enough that her

kisses were a bit higher up.

“Did you hear me?” Indra asked with a long-suffering sigh. “I feel like you’re not really invested in this conversation. And I’m only trying to help.”

“No. I’m so sorry, Indra. I know you’re trying to help.” I cleared my throat, trying to sound normal even though my focus was nowhere near our conversation. “What did you want to know, again?”

“The funeral.” He said flatly. “You didn’t tell me what you found there.”

I did not have the patience or time to explain the intricacies of the voodoo community wanting me nowhere near them. I did *not* have the patience to tell him about the two Loa that had escorted me up to the coffin, and I certainly did not have the desire at the moment to tell him what they’d said about Yvenson.

I licked my lips, trying to steady my voice by clearing my throat. “No, nope–“ I broke off, voice breaking when Yuna’s tongue flicked against my inner thigh, so close to where I wanted it. “Just uh, grabbed a piece of the dead guy’s gris-gris to uh, track his magic. And umm….” I trailed off again.

“Why’s that?” He prompted.

“Uhhhh…..” I couldn’t reply. I wasn’t even sure what he was asking. The bit of my attention that I’d spared for him had rejoined the rest of me as her hands gripped my hips and *dragged* me forward on the sofa with absolute ease.

Knowing that she could pick me up and do whatever she wanted to me did awful things to my body that I was *sure* she could see.

Yuna leaned down, her breath hot against my slit. She’d barely touched me, but I was ready to come apart at just *this*.

“Get off the phone, George,” the cecaelia murmured casually, her tone conversational in opposition to her words.

“Look. Indra. I am really, *really* busy,” I tried to explain, my eyes meeting Yuna’s. “Like, you don’t understand how *busy*–“

“With what? I’d love to help you out, George. But I don’t know how unless you give me some more information,” the hellhound pressed.

“Well….I’m just not sure how much more I can give you over the phone.” I bit my lip. “Maybe we should meet up.”

Yuna’s eyes narrowed. Her head dipped between my thighs, and I expected another breath against my slit.

I did not expect her tongue to graze my clit lightly. Nor did I expect her fingers to trace along my slit, pushing my knees just a little wider so she could slide one finger into me.

All the while her eyes never left mine.

“Okay. If you’d rather do that.” Shuffling noises came from the hellhound's side of the phone. “When would you want to get together again? We could go out for lunch tomorrow?”

Yuna’s finger pressed more deeply into me. Her tongue returned to my clit, applying more pressure than before and making my stomach tighten.

Holy *hell.*

I needed to get off this damn phone, and I was beginning to think that maybe being rude towards the sweet hellhound shifter might be worth it.

“Sure. Yeah. Lunch tomorrow.” My breathing quickened. “But hey, I gotta go. I’ll text you later. We can figure out the details. Okay?”

“Yeah. okay.” Indra sounded more puzzled than anything. I covered my mouth to try to keep the sound of my breathing from him. “Have a good night, George. Hope whatever you’re busy with goes well.”

He hung up, and I followed suit, chucking my phone to the other end of the sofa where it landed face down.

“I’m sorry,” I said, unable to look away from her and not wanting to in the least. “I really tried to get him off the phone faster.”

Yuna didn’t respond immediately. Instead, she sat back, her thumb on my clit replacing the finger inside me and rubbing against me in circular strokes.

I bit down against my lower lip, thighs clenched, and tried not to beg her for more.

“Do you need to make any other calls?” The cecaelia asked sweetly. “Perhaps to Akiva, for a weather analysis? With that bird of his, he must be very good at those.”

I swallowed heavily. “No.”

“Or…maybe to Cian, for some life advice?” She suggested in that even tone. “He seems rather reliable for that.”

I shook my head fervently, hands clenched against the couch. “I really, *really* don’t need to call anyone.” My body thrummed in anticipation that only built as she touched me.

“It’s so kind of you to sacrifice your social butterfly status for me tonight, George.” Yuna smiled, and I felt the touch of her finger against my

entrance again. “I was starting to feel like I was intruding.”

“I’m sorry,” I said in a shaky voice. “Goddess, Yuna, I really didn’t want to–“

She hooked one arm around my thigh, two fingers sinking into me as she held me still.

I couldn’t help the gasp that left my mouth, and it heightened to a cry when Yuna’s mouth found my clit. Her tongue stroked over me relentlessly, fingers thrusting in and out of me quickly.

Her actions had my hips moving, and I bucked her hold unconsciously. There was no way I could stay still. Not with how the sensations of her fingers and mouth threatened to overwhelm me so quickly.

Yuna sucked against my clit, alternating with strokes of her tongue as she added a third finger.

My arms burned as I tried to hold myself up, pleasure wracking through my body. “Oh Goddess, Yuna, please–“

“Please what,” she interrupted, pulling back. She removed her grip from my thigh, her thumb circling my clit lazily again. “Please *what*, George?”

“Please let me cum.” The pressure was insane and was driving me crazy.

"You think you deserve to?” She asked, her movements slowing and managing to hold me on edge. “You think you *deserve* for me to let you cum?”

“Yes. Please, *please*, *Yuna*–“

Her grin turned sly. “George, did you *like* almost being caught? Did you *want* Indra to know that I had my fingers in your pussy?”

I felt the heat rise to my face. “N-no. I didn’t want him to hear–“

“Are you sure?” She was enjoying this. It was plain on her beautiful face just how much she enjoyed taunting me like this. “You should’ve kept him on a little longer. He could’ve heard how wet you are for me.” She thrust her fingers harder into me, as if to make a point, and I nearly came right there.

“Maybe some other time, we’ll call him and he can listen,” she threatened, and I definitely shouldn’t have been considering how hot that would be. “But I think I’d like you to beg. I want to hear your sweet voice begging me to make you cum. I like hearing how desperate you are.” Her thumb continued to rub teasing circles over my clit.

I didn’t even hesitate. “Please–“

“Please what? Be specific.”

“Please make me cum. Please don’t stop.”

“Like this?” Her thumb pressed down suddenly, and Yuna rose up, still on her knees, to loom over me again.

“Yes. Yes *please*. Like that.” My hips rocked into her hand, chasing that delicious feeling.

Rational thought escaped my brain. I was too focused on her hands and the way she coaxed me with her voice.

“I’m gonna cum,” I whined, voice too loud to my own ears. “Yuna, I’m gonna–“

“Yes, you are,” she agreed breathily, color tingeing her own cheeks. “You’re gonna cum for me right now, aren’t you?”

I couldn’t answer. Electric pleasure raced through my body, stilling my hips and causing me to arch off the sofa.

Yuna fucked me through it, her fingers drawing out my climax until I was sure I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Oh Goddess–Yuna please. It’s too much–” I reached down, only for her to grab my wrist in her bruising grip.

“No it’s not,” she demurred. “Not until I decide it is. And I think you haven’t cum nearly enough yet.” Her fingers twisted, hand shifting until she could grind her palm against my clit.

“Tell you what,” Yuna breathed, her fingers rubbing against my inner walls. “You can cum for me two more times, and I’ll consider forgiving you for letting Indra talk your ear off.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

For the two nights after seeing Yuna's true shape, I walked the streets of New Orleans to get a scent of Yvenson's magic.

Both times, I got nothing. Not even a scent of the other woman's magic.

The first night I walked the streets alone, but when I casually mentioned it in a text message to Indra, the hellhound insisted on coming along.

We found nothing the second night, except for a group of vampires who asked rather loudly if Indra's master knew he was cavorting with a *witch.*

He politely ignored them while I tried to decide just how irritated I was, and whether or not they were worth my fangs.

Indra, apparently sensing how my frustration bit at my skin, kissed me sweetly and led me away with loud discussions of what we'd have for dinner and how much dessert he could get from some café.

Finally, we ended up back at our cars with no more clues than we'd had four hours prior.

"Can I ask you not to do this tomorrow night?" The hellhound question, leaning his shoulder against mine when I rested my hip against the driver's side of my SUV.

"Why?" I asked, eyes flicking in his direction. I pushed my hair that had come loose from its ponytail back over my shoulder.

"The gala is tomorrow, and we're going to be there *all* night," Indra promised with a roll of his eyes. "Yuna is going too, right? I don't think Merric is going to be your street-walking buddy while we're busy."

I hesitated, then replied. "He's…going too, actually. Seems like I was the only one not invited."

“Oh.” Indra looked away. “Are you upset about it? I would bring you, if I could, but we don’t exactly get a plus one. And you’d *really* hate it.”

“Why would I be jealous?” I sighed. “Obviously a once in a lifetime gala where everyone is going to be dressed like they walked out of a fairy tale that lasts *all night* will be ten kinds of boring.” I tucked the piece of hair back again, frowning.

Indra’s eyes flicked up to mine. “You *are* jealous,” he accused without any heat in his tone.

I shrugged one shoulder. “It’s fine. Go to your party and suffer. I’ll be watching bad movies with Aveline.”

“Promise you won’t do this without us?” The hellhound pressed.

“I don’t need a babysitter–“

“Yuna will *drown me* if you die,” he interrupted, turning to bracket me against my own car.

A tingle went down my spine and I reminded my body that we weren’t going to be getting any real satisfaction tonight. He would be too busy going home and getting a good night’s sleep so he could primp and groom himself for the fancy party tomorrow night. Still, I reached up to tangle my fingers in his coarse black hair that always reminded me of a German shepherd’s fur.

“I’ll be fine. And I won’t sniff the shadows without you.” I tugged lightly on him, and Indra relented easily, leaning forward to press his mouth to mine.

His hands rose to my waist, warm against my skin over the thin fabric of my t-shirt, and I brought my other arm up to loop it over his shoulder.

Sometimes, Indra’s sweetness was just what I needed and everything I craved. I appreciated all of my friends, but none of the others were so comforting and easy to be around as him. He never had to have the last word, and never baited me into an argument.

I nipped playfully at his lower lip and felt his mouth curve into a smile before he pulled away slightly. “I have to go,” he said, pressing his forehead to mine. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Have fun tomorrow,” I sighed, hands still draped over his shoulders.

“Sure,” he made a face, then pulled his keys out of his pocket to unlock his car.

Part of me wanted to search the city tomorrow night, even though I’d said I wouldn’t, if only to drive the point home that I did *not* need a

babysitter.

The other, rational part of me knew that if I found something out of my depth, I'd be in big trouble.

Thirty minutes later, when I tucked myself into bed and tuned into the rhythmic snores of Aveline down the hall, I promised myself that this time, I'd listen to the others.

Tomorrow would be boring. Just me, Aveline, and some awful movies.

It would be great.

"IF YOU SLEEP MUCH LONGER, YOU WILL BE UNSALVAGEABLE." THE VOICE was curt, impatient, and only a little familiar.

I groaned, rolling over and pulling my knees up to my chest. The full moon was barely over, and surely I was due for a day to sleep in. "Go 'way, Av," I mumbled. "I'm sleeping in." It was my day off. I could sleep until noon if I was so inclined.

And I was definitely inclined.

Suddenly the blankets were pulled off of me and a woman sighed.

"Shall I get Kriminel here? Perhaps his ghostly charms are more to your taste, George?"

My blue eyes flew open and I sat up, the world spinning for a moment as I tried to make sense of everything around me. I was in my room. That was expected. And in bed. Still mostly asleep.

My gaze landed on *Marinette Bras Cheche* herself standing in the middle of my abode, hands resting on her slim hips as she glared me down.

"You know, I read that the Loa were *legends*," I informed her, still blinking sleep out of my brain. "As in, most people don't see you at all. And if they do, it's once. We're on like, visit number three."

"Aren't you grateful?" She asked in a voice that was not at all friendly. "To be so lucky?"

"No. I'm tired. I have a plan for the day."

"I heard. You're going to watch movies with your witch cousin and not go looking for our killer tonight. Am I right?"

"If we're going to continue this…whatever it is." I gestured between us. "I'm going to need you to stop listening in on my conversations and let me catch you up like a normal person."

She raised a brow. I stared at her slightly, unsure if the nausea stirring in my stomach was unease because of her, or simply morning queasiness.

It could've been either. Or a combination.

"There's a gala tonight, which I believe you know about, yes?" Marinette asked, sitting down on the chair in front of my small vanity. She crossed her legs primly, back straight, and her eyes never left me.

Dressed in a snug black dress and heels, she didn't fit in at all with me and my room.

"Right. Big supernatural thing, yes? I've been told about it a few times now." I fought back a yawn and stood, scratching my thigh.

Obviously I couldn't force her out of my room, but I wasn't going to stand on ceremony around her when, so far, she didn't seem to want to hurt me.

Just Merric.

I couldn't understand why she'd taken to showing up while I *slept*, and I couldn't help the worry I felt at having such a guest popping in whenever she wanted.

"But you aren't going. Even though there will be many sources of powerful magic there. Voodoo, witch, vampire, and everything else. Is that right?" She went on carefully

"That is very right. I didn't get an invitation." I wasn't jealous. I *totally* wasn't jealous.

A grin curled at her lips and she held up a hand. As I watched, flames licked at her fingers and slowly a square, white envelope materialized between her pointer and middle finger.

"You got invited, I take it?" I wasn't surprised. She was a *Loa.*

"This isn't for me," Marinette said slowly, her crimson eyes bright in the early morning light. "I went to a friend of mine last night and procured it. They don't send them to any of us anymore. We've made it clear we do not wish to go."

She held it out precariously between her two fingers.

Taking the bait, I took a few steps forward and reached out to take it in my hand.

The envelope was smooth under my fingers, and when I turned it over I saw writing in very neat black letters.

Georgette Levasseur.

A thrill shot through my body. I glanced up at Marinette, who nodded at it.

"Only powerful supernaturals get these," I murmured, opening the envelope and pulling out the card it held.

It was thick, like two of my tarot cards stacked together, and solid black. A golden border had been engraved in the card, and the letters were gold engraved as well.

YOU HAVE BEEN INVITED.

Friday, September 14th.

9pm.

The Tessoro Estate.

I SQUINTED AT THE CARD. WAS THAT MAGIC I COULD SEE RUNNING THROUGH the letters?

"Won't they know I'm not supposed to be there?" I pointed out. "Since I'm, you know. *Me?"*

The Loa gazed at me, unimpressed. "Last night I informed my friend on the North American council of the Supernatural that the only living Levasseur summoner resided in New Orleans," she explained slowly. "I informed her that you have three cards of the Major Arcana, and the distinction of being a hybrid that survived all the way to adulthood. I don't need to tell you how uncommon you are, do I?"

I wasn't so sure I *liked* her telling other people about me and what I was.

"You do not," I sighed, running my fingers over the gold letters. "But…" I looked around my room, biting my bottom lip. "Not to sound like Cinderella here, but I don't have anything to wear."

"And your hair looks dreadful," Marinette agreed.

"Thanks."

"That is why I told you to *get up.* Much longer and even I won't be able to help…this." She waved her hand at me dismissively.

"Help *what?"* I asked, frown curving my lips.

“This. All of this, just…” she stood. “So you’ll go? You have to RSVP one way or the other.”

“If you *really* think I can find something to wear and can figure out what to do with–“ I made the same motion as she had, only exaggerated, at myself. “*This*. Then yes. I’ll go.”

Not just to look for her killer, but I wouldn’t say that.

“We’ll do something,” she promised. “Now, RSVP.”

When I stared at her blankly, she raised a perfect brow. “Flip the card over.”

I did so, seeing golden letters on the back. Smaller than the ones on the front, they were jagged in comparison to the flowing, elegant script of the other side of the invitation.

Will you be attending, Georgette Levasseur?

Yes. No.

“Do I tap the yes like a button?” I murmured, doing just that.

“No, George,” the Loa sighed. She came towards me, a small knife suddenly in her hand.

“*Uh*.” I took a step back but she only held it up in front of her, the blade looking too decorative to be used as more than a fancy letter opener.

“Prick your own finger, then.” She reached her hand towards me, transferring the blade to her palm. “And smear the blood over the *yes*.

“This seems so unnecessarily dramatic,” I muttered, taking the knife and setting my teeth against the inevitable pain.

It could’ve been a lot worse, I reasoned, as I stuck the tip of the blade into the pad of my middle finger. I healed instantly, and it didn’t hurt *much*. But there was something so different in purposefully stabbing myself for a little blood and getting hurt in the middle of a fight.

I did as she said, smearing the blood over the gold engraved ‘yes.’

“What now?” I asked, just before the card heated in my hand. I gasped when the paper *leapt* from my fingers, contorting in mid air until it was the perfect likeness of an origami bird.

Then, in a shower of white spark, it vanished.

“That was it,” Marinette shrugged, taking her knife back. “Get dressed.” She stared at my me, scrutinizing every inch of my body.

That look terrified me a little. I laughed off her words, praying they were a joke, and gestured to the still-closed door. “They’re in the bathroom. Let me change and I’ll put them in, okay?”

She flapped her hands at me, but didn’t move except to sit back down at my vanity and survey herself in the mirror.

Snorting, I shook my head and stepped into my closet. I was glad it was big enough for me to shut the door behind me, and did so before pulling out a pair of denim shorts and a grey t-shirt.

When I reemerged, now dressed and pulling on sneakers, she looked me over.

“It’s a good thing I didn’t count on you having anything to wear in your closet,” the Loa remarked.

I couldn’t help but sigh. Her insults weren’t half-sweet, like Akiva’s, who normally just wanted to rile me up to tease me. No. She seemed to insult me for her own pleasure, or simply just to do it.

“Sorry, O Great Loa, for not reading your mind before tonight. May we exit to the foyer so that I may brush my unworthy teeth?” I bowed mockingly.

For the first time, the hint of a true smile flickered across her lips. As if she enjoyed being spoken to like we were either friends or hated cousins.

“Lead the way,” she invited, and I opened my bedroom door, stepping out into the hallway ahead of her. In the living room, the television was on, though I couldn’t understand the language, much less the channel. I made my way towards it, pausing at the mouth of the hallway that led to our bedrooms and Aveline’s workout room.

My cousin herself stood leaning against the wall to my left, her blue eyes on the figure who sat on our couch. She sipped her coffee, face solemn, and still wore her pajama shorts and loose sweater.

Baron Kriminel was on our sofa, intent on the tv. He was dressed just as well as Marinette, in dark jeans and a black button-up with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

“…Cousin,” I greeted, nodding at Aveline as I stopped beside her.

“George, may I ask you something?” Aveline asked, not taking her eyes off of the Loa on our couch.

“You may,” I allowed as Marinette went past me.

Aveline watched her, and blinked.

“Am I dreaming?” My cousin asked finally.

“Not to my knowledge, no.” Unless I was dreaming too, I supposed.

“Wonderful. One more question.” Aveline sipped her coffee. “What in the *world* is sitting on my sofa, and how did it get in without tripping my wards, alerting either of us, or unlocking the door?”

“Ah.” I cleared my throat. Trying to come up with a plausible answer that wouldn’t be *too* unbelievable. “Well, Aveline. Greatest cousin in the history of the world. That right there would be a Loa.”

She stared at me, lips pressed flat. “A what?”

“Oh. A Loa is–“

“I know what a Loa *is*, George,” Aveline interrupted impatiently. “I live in New Orleans, not under a rock.”

When I glanced at the Baron Kriminel, I saw that he was gazing at us with amusement clear on his face.

“Well…he’s a Loa. And so is she.” I pointed to both of them in turn. “Also, I’m going to have to cancel our plans for tonight. It seems I have an appointment.”

“In a Loa’s bed?” Aveline assumed. “You know, I thought I’d be the one with a harem *way* before you. Was it that night at *Euphoric?* Was that your poly awakening? And what do the others think of competing against *deities*?”

“Oh, *cher*,” Kriminel’s voice was a low purr. I expected him to correct her on the spot. “There is no *competition*, I can assure you of that.”

“That’s not helping, “ I sighed, pressing my fingers to the bridge of my nose. “Av, I’m not sleeping with them. I’m not interested in sleeping with them, and they aren’t trying to win me into their beds. I’m helping them with something.”

“You're helping….the *Loa,”* Aveline repeated.

“Yep.”

“*You?”*

Kriminel’s smile widened considerably.

“I am, in fact. That’s why I’m going with them now, and why I’m going to some stupid party later.”

Admittedly, I was a little excited. What would it be like? A gala for the powerful and the preternatural had to be luxurious, to say the very least.

“Please tell me you are not going to the Gala held by the North American council tonight,” Aveline requested, surprising me with her knowledge of it.

“Yeah. I am, actually. Sorry, Marinette only brought one invite–“

“Goddess bless, George. I’m so glad you were born the summoner and not me. That’s a lot of ‘no thank you.’” She shuddered, then shuddered again.

“Can we leave soon?” Marinette interrupted, standing by the door and very obviously itching to leave. “I told you we have things to do, or you won’t be going tonight.”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m *sorry*,” I mumbled, holding my hands up in surrender. I wasn’t really that sorry. While any of my friends getting angry or treating me like I didn’t belong made me all kinds of upset, Marinette’s words were starting to just go in one ear and out the other.

I quickly brushed my teeth before coming back out into the living room to face her again.

Aveline was seated cross-legged on the sofa, her eyes fixed on Baron Kriminel.

He pretended to ignore her, but it was easy to see his half-hidden smile and sideways looks towards my cousin.

“Where do you live?” Aveline asked abruptly. “And how did you get in here without tripping my alarms.”

“I live in a house, just like you,” Kriminel replied. “And I did so because I am very, very good.” His town was low. Husky and….purring?

Marinette watched me, her red eyes gleaming like an angry cat’s until I stood beside her at the door. “Are you coming?” She demanded of the other Loa.

“Hadn’t thought I would,” Kriminel shrugged. “That’s more your thing, after all.” He turned his bright blue eyes on Aveline. “And I’m sure the witch won’t mind me staying here.”

She looked at him over her coffee, her legs drawn up under her, and I prepared for her scathing reply. “You can stay,” she shrugged. “Do you want coffee?”

What?

I tried to catch her eye, but Aveline very carefully avoided looking at me.

Was her question about me sleeping with them not quite so benevolent as I'd thought? Had she been worried for my safety, or interested for *herself*?

I opened my mouth to say something about the dangers of letting a Loa stay in the house, and the probable perils of making eyes at one over your coffee cup, but clamped my lips together a second later.

Like I was one to talk. How many times now had Marin warned me off of Merric, for all the good it did?

"Priceless," Marinette muttered, extending a hand to me. "You remember Samedi's travel spell, yes?"

"I do," I sighed, putting my hand in hers. "I hated it."

She smirked. "This is nothing like that." Magic gathered in her palm, and suddenly I was yanked off my feet.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

"You don't like it," Marinette sat down behind me, watching my face through the three paneled mirror I was standing at.

"It's a lot, is all," I denied. "Give a girl a chance to adjust." I spun slowly, the heavy fabric of the dress I wore rustling around me.

This really was *a lot*. In the mere span of five hours, Marinette had spirited me to some corner of New Orleans that I'd never walk into myself. I was sure I couldn't even afford *parking* in this area. Let alone buying something.

But we hadn't just gone places with her dragging me from one shop to another. She'd gone out of her way to buy me everything she said I'd need for the night, including shoes, accessories, hair coloring, and Goddess knew what else.

Now I stood in front of a mirror at the fanciest dress boutique I'd ever seen, only half recognizing the woman in the mirror.

The pink was gone from my hair, and the stylist had toned it so that the blonde had lightened to platinum silver. If I looked very closely, I could still see the hint of blonde, but only just. It made my skin look paler, in my opinion.

The Loa had made the poor stylist redo my makeup four times until finally she had been satisfied with the look. Now my eyes were lined heavily and set off by silver and dark mauve eyeshadow. With the liner, my blue eyes looked almost impossibly bright. My lips were dark and full under the matte burgundy lipstick. I wasn't so sure how I felt about it, as I never wore anything more than eyeliner myself.

And now I stood in a *dress*. It wasn't that I never wore dresses. I probably owned one. Somewhere.

But I certainly didn't own one like this.

The sleeveless top of the solid black dress was edged in lace and lay flush against my skin, hugging me tightly down to my hips. I'd thought for sure I wouldn't be able to breathe, but the fabric was comfortable, and easy to move in. At my hips, the dress flared outward in a multitude of ruffled, still lacy fabric. It stopped in the front at the length of a short skirt, showing off black tulle that lent the skirt volume. At the sides it cascaded down until the black lace of the back brushed the floor behind me.

"I won't be chasing down any killers in these," I informed Marinette, lifting one of my feet that was trapped in black four-inch heels. The heel itself was solid gold, and matched the fine gold chains that went around my ankles.

"If it comes to that, take the shoes off," Marinette shrugged, lifting her hand dismissively.

I loved the outfit, truthfully. But it was so strange to see this woman in the mirror that reminded me more of beautiful Aveline than *me*.

But no. That was definitely me, not my cousin, staring back at me.

"Do you like it?" The saleswoman asked, a very nice woman with her hair in a French braid and yellow eyes. "I can find something else for you, if you don't."

"I love it," I breathed, lifting the fabric of the skirt slightly so I could run my fingers over the heavy lace.

"But I also can't *afford* it," I told Marinette. "And it's going to take me weeks to pay you back for the rest of this."

The Loa got to her feet, her raised brow the definition of condescension.

"I can assure you that this amount of money means nothing to me," Marinette informed me. "Don't think of paying me back for this, or anything else." She walked around me, examining me like I was some kind of show pony.

"Do *you* like it?" I asked, a bit uncertain.

"I do," the Loa said after a moment. "But it isn't enough, I don't think."

"Not *enough*?" I repeated, confused.

The shop owner squinted, nodding. "Not without an enchantment, I agree. What were you thinking?"

“Fire and an entrance,” Marinette mused. “Remember how we talked about you being invited, George? And how you worry people will know you don’t belong?”

“…Yeah,” I said, not liking where she was going.

“We’re going to make them think so too.”

“Will other people be entering like that?” I asked suspiciously.

“Everyone at the gala will be tryin to make the biggest entrance,” the shop owner said. “I promise you that.”

“Then, what am I going to wear *in*?”

The older woman left, then returned with a very plain black dress that fell in a straight line to the floor.

When I put it on, I pressed my lips together. “I don’t like it,” I said.

“You’re not supposed to like it,” the woman promised. “They won’t, either.”

“I thought I was hunting for you-know-what tonight,” I reminded Marinette as I looked at the plain, silky dress.

“We’re accomplishing a lot tonight,” she answered enigmatically. “If the council doesn’t take you seriously, then you’ll fade into obscurity before you’ve even come into your powers fully. Do you really want that?”

“Why *don’t* I want that?” I asked, hands on my hips. “Aren’t the supernaturals in the history books mostly villains? Saving present, esteemed company of course.”

“I mean like your friends. Your fox, for one. Do you know how many people know of him? Or your vampire?”

I paused, glancing back at her. “Of course he’s famous. He’s the vampire king.”

Her grin grew wider in amusement at my reply. “I meant before that. All of the creatures you smell like are very well known in most corners of the globe,” she promised. “It’s only you who remains unknown to all but a very few.”

I glanced down to escape her piercing gaze. “I’m a lot different from all of them.”

“Are you though? The only difference I see…” She reached out and tipped my chin upward. “Is that you seem content to let them overshadow you. Even being what you *are*.” She dropped my face after a moment and turned to the shop owner. “You can charge it to my tab. And I’ll take

everything so I can enchant it." The Loa walked away, the doorbell smacking the glass as she went to the sidewalk outside.

"If I may offer a bit of advice?" The saleswoman asked, unzipping the plain black dress so that I could finish getting out of it on my own.

"What?" I bundled my hair into my hand to make her job easier,.

"Don't let her rush you, or turn you into something you don't want to be. If you accept her help blindly, I fear there may come a day that her help is not as innocent as it may seem."

I stepped off of the pedestal in front of the mirrors and paused, uneasy. "Does she help people often?" I asked, without looking at the woman.

"No. None of *them* do. I'm not saying she means you any ill will, but sometimes their idea of helping isn't what you would do." She smiled suddenly, and rested a hand on my shoulder. "Oh, I do wish I would be there tonight, to see the looks on all their faces when you arrive."

Comforted by her change of tone, I smiled too. "I hope it goes the way she thinks it will."

SIX HOURS AND TWO MINUTES LATER, I WAS PRETTY SURE IT WASN'T GOING to go like I'd thought it would.

I still sat in the back of the black town car that Marinette and Kriminel had pulled up in, and I still wore the very plain and boring black dress.

"I feel sick," I told them, my stomach turning. "I can't get out wearing this."

Both Loa guarded the doors, not letting me out.

Both of them also looked very happy at my struggle.

"It'll be fine. *You* will be fine," Marinette said firmly.

"She's right," Kriminel agreed, patting my shoulder.

He'd still been with Aveline when Marinette and I had returned, and his female companion had all but been forced to drag him away from my cousin.

"I don't think she's right." I checked the mirror again, heart pounding when I saw my slightly clumsy eyeliner that was *not* of my freewill, and hair that had gone back to its blonde and faded out pink.

I knew none of it was real, just a very convincing illusion that would quite literally burn away, but that didn't make this any easier.

“Have you looked at them?” I demanded, jabbing a finger towards a woman dressed in an *armored dress* that shimmered with magic. “They look amazing!”

“And so will you. Remember that the flames won’t burn you. Do *not* flinch under any circumstances,” Marinette ordered. “Are they almost done?” She glanced at Kriminel.

His eyes, ever ghostly, paled out even more. He looked around, searchingly, as if he saw more than the interior of this car.

“Almost,” he said. “They just introduced her vampire.” Then the Loa blinked, and his eyes returned to normal.

Did he mean Cian? I swallowed, wondering just what *he* said when he had been introduced ti the council.

What would he think-what would any of them think-when I showed up unexpectedly?

“Why are your eyes blue?” I asked unthinkingly, my inner monologue becoming verbal. “All the others have red eyes. But you don’t.”

“A very astute observation,” Baron Kriminel agreed. “Are you ready?”

My heart tried to escape my chest. All thoughts of his eyes were forgotten. “No,” I said. “Uninvite me. One of you go.” I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t possibly embarrass myself like this, in front of all these people.

“Remember what I said about fading into obscurity, George?” Marinette asked sweetly. I nodded fervently. “This is me, not letting you.” She grabbed my arm and levered me out of the car, into the empty parking lot.

The two of them walked with me, looking like they were simply escorting me and not *dragging* me into the mansion. As soon as we were out of the car, they’d put on their public faces and no longer looked like the Loa they were.

“Try to at least *look* confident,” Kriminel was saying, walking me past gardens and up to a well lit front porch. “We’ll trigger the enchantment ourselves, so don’t worry about that. They’ll *love* you.”

“Or they’ll be impressed by you, at least,” Marinette agreed.

We’d approached the large, double-doored entrance of the stone and marble estate. Did someone actually *live* here?

The man and woman at the door looked me over, unimpressed.

When I looked to Marinette for assistance, I found that both Loa had vanished. My stomach twisted in knots at the sudden feeling of being so *alone.*

“Are you in the right place?” The woman ventured, very pointedly looking me over, from my badly-dyed hair to my plain dress.

“I am,” I promised in a low voice, my heart thumping against my ribs. “I’m Georgette Levasseur.”

Recognition dawned on the man’s face. “Marinette’s friend,” he commented quietly. “Go on in. Do you know what to do?”

I shook my head from side to side.

The woman sighed, the look on her face one of pity. “You should’ve found someone to help you with your outfit. I get that this is your first gala, but everyone in there is trying to make a point. You will, but not for a good reason.” She hesitated. “Are you sure you belong here?”

“I got an invitation,” I said lightly.

“Right.” The woman didn’t look convinced. “You’ll go in and walk up these stairs. Wait on the landing until the announcers tell you to go in. They’ll open the doors for you, and you’ll walk down the stairs, and give your name when asked.” She looked me over again. “Good luck.”

I needed it.

My hands were clammy as I walked in and up the stairs, surprised to find a group of people on the carpeted landing.

As soon as I hit the top step, the five of them or so were looking at me in derision.

A girl around my age frowned, her eyes wide with pity.

“I think you’re in the wrong place, darling,” a strikingly attractive man said with a chuckle. “Because this is not for you, dressed like *that*.”

I frowned, but he was right. All five of them wore outfits that should’ve been impossible. One woman’s dress looked like it was made of living flowers, and as I watched they wilted and rebloomed. The others of the group didn’t look quite so impressive, but they all were dressed as if they’d walked out of some fairytale forest.

Would Cian, Indra, and Akiva match? If so….what would they have chosen to wear?

Another woman wore a dress that was cut very low, with bunches of living shadows draped about her like a cLoak. She was accompanied by a man in a similar outfit, with a deep V showing off his tattooed and well-defined body.

“All of us were young once, I believe,” A new voice drawled. “Or have you all lived so long that you’ve forgotten *your* first gala?”

I looked around, blinking when I finally found the speaker.

A handsome man smiled at me from a high-backed chair, and while his grin was easy, he looked like he belonged in the throne-like seat. An air of royalty hung about him, a sort of regality to his presence.

And he reminded me inexplicably of Cian.

They looked really nothing alike. This man had dark red eyes to Cian's Scarlett, and chestnut brown hair. He was just as fair-skinned, I supposed, and of a similar build but that was all.

Still…

He looked resplendent in a suit with a trailing coat, with the sleeves rolled back to show forearms and the silver bracelets there. Red accents decorated the fabric of his coat, but when I looked closer, I realized something strange.

It wasn't fabric at all, but *scales*.

"Dragon scales, love," the man explained in a light, european accent as he rose to his feet. "My companions picked it out. They're already inside." He came towards me, crossing the luxurious but minimalistic landing and holding out a hand. "My name is Niall."

"I'm George," I introduced, smiling in relief and shaking his hand. "And your outfit is amazing."

When I spoke, he stiffened slightly, his eyes going over me like he saw something more than what I wore.

"That is a very complex and convincing enchantment," he murmured, surprising me and shaking my hand lightly before letting go.

"You can see it?" I asked warily, letting my hand fall.

"Only a little." He chuckled, glancing at the others who still glanced at me and whispered insults that I could absolutely hear. "You're going to shock them out of their minds. Tell me, is the fire I can feel actually there?"

"It is," I confirmed.

The announcer called two names, and part of the group of five left.

I watched, letting a breath out from pursed lips.

"You're nervous," Niall observed, shoving his hands in the pockets of his cloth pants. It seemed only the jacket itself was the almost metallic scale.

"I am *so* nervous," I agreed under my breath.

"I was nervous the first time. Everyone here was, I promise. Next time you'll be a pro."

“Next time?” I asked. “I’m not even through *this* time.”

He laughed warmly. The other three were ushered through the small door. “Keep your chin up, George.” He winked when the usher gestured for him.

Then it was just me.

I wandered further onto the landing, looking at the marble statuettes and gilded furniture.

However, I didn’t get much time to appreciate it.

“Georgette Levasseur?” The man at the small white door called my name, looking at me appraisingly.

I walked to him on stiff legs and nodded.

“You’re going to walk through this door, then through the big doors,” he explained. “Walk down the stairs…normally this is where you would show off what you’re wearing, but…” he looked me over. “I guess it’s your first time.” He didn’t sound placating or condescending. He sounded sympathetic, and offered me a kind smile. I appreciated it.

“Yeah. First time,” I agreed quietly, wanting to bounce like I was gearing up for a fight.

Maybe I was.

“The council will ask for your name. You’ll say it. Loudly, but don’t *yell*. You’ll greet them, they’ll greet you, and then you’ll mingle. Find someone to lean on, maybe? You look terrified.” His look was pitying, and it did nothing for my frazzled nerves.

“Keep your head up. No matter what,” he said, ushering me through.

That was easier said than done, I didn’t reply.

The hallway on the other side of the door was short, and two doors at the end revealed a dazzlingly gold room that I couldn’t see much of.

“Please don’t let me down,” I murmured, not sure if I was talking to myself or the Loa.

The distance between me and ruin was closing quickly. Twenty feet. Then ten.

Five.

My steps slowed when I hit the two large white and gold doors that lay open in front of me.

When I entered to stand at the top of the stairs, the talking died out, and all eyes turned up to look at me in my simple black dress.

All of my friends were here somewhere. I had barely considered what *they* might think, and I had to fight not to run away screaming.

It was hard to take in details of the large ballroom that sat at the bottom of the marble stairs–

Oh Goddess, what if I tripped.

I could *not* trip. If I did, I would clearly never be able to show my face anywhere. I'd have to change my name, and–

And I was spacing out. I was wasting time.

Three people stood at the foot of the stairs, a good ten feet back. I couldn't focus on them right now, nor the opulence of the white and gold room, but I had to *walk.*

None of the faces I saw looked particularly wowed or friendly and–

And there was Merric. Looking at me in absolute confusion and slight disbelief. A frown tugged at his lips that I couldn't read.

At least there was one semi-friendly face here.

It's time to walk, George, I yelled at myself internally, making myself take the first step.

My hands shook, but I forced myself not to clench them.

Don't look down. Don't look down. I was so going to look down.

Whispers met my ears, along with muffled giggles and snickering.

"Who are you?" Called one of the women of the council, an amused edge to her voice. The three of them stood back from the foot of the stairs, in a cleared space of the ballroom.

I lifted my chin, suddenly feeling the magic tingling over my skin.

I could-*would*-do this.

Don't fade into obscurity, George.

"My name is Georgette Levasseur," I said, just as flames bloomed at my hands.

The murmuring got louder and the warm flames ran up my arms.

"Descendant of Delphine Levasseur." My great-great-grandmother had been important, and Kriminel had told me it might be pertinent to mention her.

The flames licked at my skin, curling the edges of plain dress before catching the fabric on fire that glowed blue-white. More flames climbed my throat, catching fire to my hair and turning it into a halo of flame.

My hands no longer shook. The faces of those nearest me had fallen from amusement to amazement, and it gave me confidence to keep walking.

My heels sent up sparks when I stepped to the floor, just as the flames burnt up and my dress became the lace brocade, high-low masterpiece that it truly was. My hair fell in waves around my shoulders, the silver of starlight. Flames pulsed over my dress once more, going down my arms and alighting at my fingertips before fizzling out.

I stood in front of the North American Council of the Supernatural, my head high and my gaze direct.

“And I am the last of the Levasseaur summoners.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

The woman who stood a bit forward of her companions watched me with a gaze I couldn't read. I took that moment to study her, noting that her eyes seemed just as black as her hair. Her dress was a white gown that plunged in a daring V, then fell in waves to the floor. The gold accents shimmered, changing color as I watched, and the fabric too shifted its hue under my eyes.

"I don't believe we've had someone make such an entrance in a few years, have we?" The woman glanced between her companions, a woman with red hair and a thin face, and a man with eyes the color of dried blood and mouse brown hair.

"Welcome, Georgette Levasseur." She held a hand out to me, and I approached, my heart hammering in my chest. I inclined my head, holding my hand out and taking hers as I did.

The Loa had gone over this until I had it drilled into my head. I couldn't fuck it up. Well, being me I supposed there was a solid chance of doing just that. But I was going to try my damndest *not* to.

"Thank you for inviting me," I murmured. "I'm honored to be noticed by the council."

The black haired woman chuckled. "Don't tease," she replied, just as quietly. "When one has such claims to power as you, we were remiss in not sending you an invitation."

I straightened, dropping her hand as she went on. "Please enjoy yourself, Georgette. I hope you'll have some time later for you and I to talk. Those of the summoning craft must stick together, don't you agree?"

A chill went down my spine. I'd gone from knowing absolutely zero summoners to suddenly knowing two. And both of them struck me as intimidating.

"Of course," I said, nodding again.

Her smile was barely there. She clapped her hands together, and as if on cue, a lone violinist began to play, soon to be accompanied by the others in his quartet.

Murmurs picked up in the hall, and as the council swept away from me, most of the attention from the crowd went with them.

I was alone in a sea of very finely dressed, and very dangerous strangers.

"Seems I was wrong to judge," a cool voice remarked, prompting me to look over my shoulder.

The young man from the landing stood behind me, a glass of champagne in hand as his eyes raked my new appearance. "Georgette, was it? I'll certainly remember." Before I could reply, he rejoined his female companion and didn't look back.

"Too bad you didn't tell me what to do next," I muttered, as if the Loa could hear me. I walked aimlessly, taking in the luxurious ballroom of the estate. Where had Merric gone, I wondered. I'd been sure I'd seen him here.

The floor, like the stairs, was polished white marble with silver swirls in its depths. The railings around the balcony were gold, and matched the golden accents throughout the room, lending to the sheer opulence of the location.

Resting a hand on the cool banister, I stared at it and considered what to do. If the others had responsibilities here, I couldn't simply stick to them like glue, now could I?

"*George*!" A warm hand caught my waist, spinning me until I could see Indra's bright orange eyes and wide grin. "I didn't think you were invited." He pressed his forehead sweetly to mine for a moment.

"Me neither," I admitted. "Guess I'm just full of surprises today."

Indra's eyes trailed over my gown. "And I guess it's a good thing that *I* am not so easily burned." He traced the flicker of a flame along the bodice of my dress, then up over my shoulder, tickling my skin where he touched. While the flames had, for the most part, gone out, it seemed that Marinette's spell had residual, flashy effects.

I shivered slightly, and had the distinct pleasure of watching his eyes darken at the sight.

“You cannot do this to me tonight,” Indra laughed, leaning forward until our lips brushed together. “Cian will give me the mother of all lectures if I don’t keep my hands off you. In his opinion, an event like this deserves at least a moderate amount of respect from all of us.”

“Mother of all lectures, you say?” I batted my eyes at him. “So I should go brush up on Akiva and provoke him into touching me too? So *he* gets lectured?” I ran my hands over the front of his clothing, noticing for the first time what he wore.

If I was like cold fire, he was the volcanic opposite. A soft fabric jacket lay open on his shoulders, almost draped off of them with sleeves that stopped just past his elbows. Under that were black sleeves that looped over his thumbs, and he wore golden bracelets on each wrist.

My hands went up of their own accord to run over the wide velvet neckpiece he wore that looked suspiciously like a collar.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” I teased, smoothing my fingers down the dark red coat that was belted at his waist. It ended above his knees, and revealed pants just as snug as the sleeves on his arms tucked into black boots.

“Not really,” he laughed, gripping my hand and tugging me forward. “Come on.” He pulled me past the crowd, though I refused to be led along like a child. I walked at his side, my hand clasping his.

When he glanced at me, I couldn’t quite decipher the look on his face. Was it surprise? Approval? *Both?*

We cleared the crowd and approached a small group in a corner, my eyes landing squarely on Akiva. The lich looked like he was trying very hard to become one with the wall, and was failing miserably.

If I’d thought the three of them would be matching, I was sorely mistaken. Cian seemed completely immersed in whatever conversation he was having, so I found myself with my attention fully on Akiva. The lich wore a long black coat, belted at the waist like Indra’s with a large hood pooled at his shoulders. Metal pieces that looked like ribs wrapped around his chest, stopping near the middle of his jacket.

The rest of his ensemble was black as well, and when I got closer, I saw that his eyes were lined in black.

He was *gorgeous*. All of them were gorgeous in their own ways tonight. *Radiant*, even, compared to the plainness of the people I did not know.

“I never knew you were so talented with the eyeliner,” I complimented, impressed with Akiva’s look.

He turned to look at me with a frown forming at his lips. “Should I ask you for tips now? Yours is much better than mine.” He flicked a gaze over me, eyes on my shoes as they kicked up embers with every step. “If you walk on the carpet, will you set it aflame?”

“I don’t know.” I glanced downward at my black heels. “We could find out. You look like you could use a distraction.”

Before he could respond, Cian broke off his conversation with the man he was speaking to and wrapped an arm around Akiva’s waist with a long glance in my direction.

“Don’t encourage him, George,” the vampire drawled. “It’s hard enough keeping him from leaping out a window.”

I couldn’t answer. I was busy trying to pick my jaw up off the floor at the sight of his clothes.

“What is this?” I asked, reaching out and running my fingers over scarlet fur that rippled with magic.

“Fake,” Cian chuckled. “But it’s magicked. Of course, you know that by now. You had me worried, you know, when you showed up looking so human.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” I admitted, my fingers brushing the velvety fur that hugged his arm to his elbow, where the jacket became an honest to Goddess *gauntlet.* His boots were black metal to match, his black pants tucked into them.

It was terrible of him to wear nothing under the open jacket. What else was I supposed to look at, if not *him*?

Silver chains kept the jacket from falling completely to the sides, and they hunt from one side of the coat to the other on his chest.

“Wow,” I said again.

“Have you forgotten me already, George?” A vaguely familiar voice chuckled.

I finally looked away from Cian, straight to the man from the landing who wore the coat of dragon scale. He was smiling easily, his hands shoved into his pockets.

Cian looked between him and me. “You know each other?” He asked, surprised.

Akiva made a noise to my right that made me glance in his direction, but he turned away before I could see his face.

“We met earlier,” I explained. “Outside the doors.”

“I would’ve tried to make more of an impression if I knew that you were acquainted with Cian.” He nudged my vampire, who smiled.

“You’re friends?” I asked, surprised.

“We’ve known each other for an *unfortunate* long time,” the man–*Niall*, I remembered–agreed. “I knew him long before those two did.” He nodded at Indra and Akiva.

“Oh.” I didn’t know what to say. “I guess–“

Indra gasped, his arm pressing to mine without warning. I turned as he straightened, schooling his features back into something less surprised.

“Do you *have* to do that?” He asked gently, speaking to the woman who had made him stumble.

Had she pushed him on purpose?

The white-haired girl *grinned* unapologetically. “You should’ve seen me coming, Indra,” she replied, her eyes coming to rest on mine.

They were the color of fresh embers, much like Indra’s were.

Was she a hellhound as well?

“That was certainly an entrance you made,” she stated, sliding an arm over Indra’s as if she might tow him off. “How do you know our Indra?”

Our Indra?

I fought not to look at him.

“We’re friends,” I shrugged. “I met him when I moved here.”

“When did you move here?” Another voice caused me to look over my shoulder.

A girl who looked *just* like the first stood at Niall’s side.

And a third on his other side, hanging onto his arm. If I had to guess their mortal age, I’d put them in their early twenties, but something about the feel of them made me sure they were much, much older.

“A couple months ago,” I said slowly, noting their long dresses that hugged their bodies were made of the same white dragon scale as Niall’s coat.

He had said someone else had picked out his outfit. Was it one of these three? Dark red makeup gave them a dramatic, intimidating appearance.

I wondered if it was intentional.

“Come on, Indra,” the girl on his arm tugged against him. “I want to go talk to someone, and you make a very nice accessory.”

He mumbled something under his breath, but went with her.

I was confused in more ways than one, but kept my mouth shut.

“He’ll be fine,” Cian said, as if reading my thoughts. “They’re just *really* fond of him.” He traded grins with Niall.

“Mostly Alecto,” the girl hanging on his arm commented. “Tisiphone and I can take him or leave him.”

“She’s Megaera,” Tisiphone introduced.

“Like the Furies, right?” I asked, bemused.

They glanced at me with the same look of surprise in their matching eyes.

“Yes,” Tisiphone agreed. “*Very* good. Not many people know who we’re named for. You’re a summoner, you said?” Her eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

Akiva came to stand at my side, like I was facing down a real fury and not just a woman in a very impressive dress.

When he touched my arm, flames rippled from my dress to his fingers.

Tisiphone looked at him, then back to me. A very small smile played at her lips, and I fought to not mention it or look to Akiva for answers.

I shifted, the act sending up embers. “I am,” I told her.

“But–correct me if I’m wrong–you can’t be a summoner without any cards…right?” She went on delicately, a look of careful confusion on her heart-shaped face.

“Cards don’t dictate your magic. Only what parts of it you can use,” I replied, leaning into Akiva slightly.

It was a mistake. She looked between us again, and I could see her trying not to smile.

When I happened to glance at Megaera, I saw that she looked away, but the same smile played on her lips.

I hated it.

“What parts of your magic can you use, George?” She leapt on the question like it was her endgame.

“I think we’re all rather interested in that,” Niall agreed, breaking off his conversation about weather patterns in Europe with Cian.

I wouldn’t look at Akiva for direction.

It didn’t matter that these three made me unsure. I had to stand straight on my own, without leaning on either of them to tell me what to say.

In this particular case, it seemed that Akiva was much more my ally than Cian, who only looked at me indulgently to await my answer.

But without him saying something or looking at him for some visual cue, I didn’t know what Akiva’s hand on my arm meant.

My stomach clenched lightly, but I answered anyway. “I can use all parts of my magic. I’m not a careless summoner.” Surely since they were friends with the troublesome trio, it was safe to admit to them what my powers were.

“You’ll have to forgive her,” Megaera remarked slyly. “We haven’t met a real summoner in a long, *long* time. Right, Uriel?” Her gaze slid to look over my shoulder.

An unexpected chill traveled up my spine, and I had to lock my knees to not jump. Still, I felt myself stiffen, and I looked to my left as the stranger strode past me to stand with Megaera.

“Apart from our dearest council leader…” the ebony-skinned man lifted his champagne glass in a sardonic toast. “It’s been years since I’ve seen a summoner that held any of the Arcana.” His green eyes came to rest on mine, and I noted that he was dressed similarly to Akiva.

Was he a lich as well?

Hold on…

I glanced at Akiva, then to Uriel and the three girls who had the eyes of hellhounds.

Then to Niall.

Was it just me, or were their companions eerily similar? Hellhounds, men with magic that felt similar, and vampires themselves?

When I looked up at Akiva, I saw that his narrowed eyes were fixed on mine. He shook his head very slightly, as if warning me off of something.

“I’m at a disadvantage then,” I said, adopting a more hapless, friendly attitude. “You all know what I am, but I don’t know what *you* are.” Would they respond to my obvious hint?

“You don’t?” Tisiphone traded a look with Uriel. “Well, him I understand. You wouldn’t have much reason to be around *Bokor*, would you?”

A *Bokor*?

I was confused. According to Nathaniel's mother, that was the term for a darkly inclined voodoo practitioner. She'd said it like an insult, but Tisiphone didn't treat it as such.

"I know some people in that community," I disagreed with a shrug, not mentioning specifics. My eyes left hers to trail over the golden statues against one wall. "But not well enough to know your magic just by the feel of it."

"Perhaps we know the same people," Uriel murmured in a soft tenor voice that was made for whispering naughty things in my opinion. He reached out a hand that I took, surprised at the firmness of his grip. "We'll have to talk some time. Not many witches treat my kind as friends."

I bit my lip to stop myself from replying that not many voodoo practitioners seemed to, either.

Marinette had been just as disdainful of the term when it applied to those that caused harm.

Which confused me all the more as to why he wore it so proudly.

"You didn't tell me you'd collected a summoner for your little group, Cian," Niall chuckled, nudging the blonde's shoulder.

Collected? I stiffened, aware of Akiva's tightening grip on my arm.

"He didn't 'collect' me," I couldn't stop myself from saying. "And I'm not part of his group." Maybe sometimes, on weekends and any night I could bust down their door, but nowhere near like the way Akiva and Indra were.

Niall's dark red eyes flashed in amusement.

I wasn't a fan of being the source of someone's amusement when I was defending myself.

Before he could reply, however, arms wrapped around my waist, drawing me back in an iron grip and causing a shower of sparks to erupt from my gown.

I inhaled, and immediately the hairs standing at the back of my neck went down.

Yuna stared at Niall over my shoulder, her fingers linked at my waist. "I don't think anyone can *collect* people," the cecaelia said offhandedly. "Well, I don't, at least. I don't know about them, but George came to me *more* than willingly." She flashed a very bright smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Was she *jealous*?

“I’ve been waiting for you to let her go for the past five minutes,” Yuna went on. “Time’s up, so she and I are going to go walking, instead of huddling in this corner like…” she looked at Akiva, who had been strangely silent.

The strangeness of that hadn’t hit me until now. I’d been too wrapped up in dealing with Niall’s comrades.

And where the hell had Indra gone?

Whatever Yuna finished with, I didn’t catch it. I blinked when she tugged lightly on my hip, and looked at her with a grin before letting my gaze find Akiva’s.

Goddess, he looked miserable.

“Do you want to come walk with us?” I offered.

His lips parted as his eyes went to Cian. “No,” he said at last. “But I will go find Indra to make sure Alecto has not carried him off.” He threw the last part at Cian like a threat, then stalked off into the crowd.

“See you later, George.” Cian smiled at me with eyes that glittered scarlet. “Stay safe for me, won’t you?”

“I will try my very best,” I told him, fighting the urge to sweep him a low, dramatic bow in this gorgeous dress.

Yuna towed me away as well, saving me from making any stupid remarks or staring awkwardly at the others.

“I don’t like them,” I told her as we walked around a throng of people that had wings attached to their costumes. The music had picked up now that everyone was here, and I could hear the sounds of the string quartet picking up from across the ballroom. “Those friends of Cian’s? I just…” I shook my head, confused. “Maybe it’s just still runoff from the full moon, but I got really ruffled at him talking about Cian ‘collecting’ me.”

Catching sight of her intent gaze, I bit my lip. “I’m sorry, Yuna. I know you don’t want to talk about men, and them least of all.”

The corner of her lips curled into a smile. “We can talk about whatever you want. If you need to get something off your chest, I don’t mind listening.”

I shook my head. It wasn’t fair, and I wouldn’t put it on her.

Especially not with the way her eyes raked me, like she could see right through my dress and liked what she saw.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

"It does terribly inappropriate things to my body when you look at me like that," I whispered, sure that my face was reddening with my words.

Her eyes flicked back to mine, aqua against sky blue, and her smile was a sinful promise.

"It's a terrible tease that I cannot do more than *look*," the cecaelia murmured in response, her fingers tracing the lace brocade at my chest.

"Sure we can't find a deserted corner behind a curtain? A hat closet?" I all but whined, batting my eyes at her.

She sighed, but seemed to consider it. "No," she said at last. "It would be extremely inappropriate and disrespecting the rules of the gala."

"How terribly upstanding of you," I said, drawing away from her to look over the balcony. "Could we go-uh oh."

I didn't know what had happened, but people were backing away from the floor below us. Two people stood in the newly emptied area, one of them sipping from a champagne glass and looking almost bored.

It was *Merric*.

The other was a woman with long dark hair that fell in a curtain that contrasted with her very pale skin. She wore a traditional kimono of pale pink, and nine white tails writhed at her back in irritation.

She was a kitsune, then. Like Merric. Another nine tailed kitsune.

And one who looked to be pissed off.

My friend, on the other hand, looked anything but. Opposite to her in every way, his own hair was its usual tousled bedhead, and his nine tails fell behind him to the floor like a gloriously soft bustle.

“What’s going on?” I asked, leaning over to Yuna with my hands on the railing.

“Hmm.” She rested her forearms on the rail, the silver of her dress catching my eye.

I wanted to look more closely at what she wore, but my attention was fixated on Merric below.

“I think she’s mad,” Yuna observed unhelpfully. “It’s Merric, so we shouldn’t be surprised.”

“But she has nine tails too,” I argued. “If he’s pissed off someone that’s more on his level–“ Her chuckle cut through the tension in my body.

“George, that fox would *never* pick a fight with someone who might hurt him. Be reasonable.” She looked up at me, and one brow rose. “You’re really worried, aren’t you? Is there something I’m missing with him?”

“What?” I was confused. She knew he was my friend. Wasn’t it expected that I’d worry for him?

Then I realized what she meant, and my face reddened again.

“What? *No*,” I promised forcefully. “He doesn’t like me like that–Yuna, I don't think he likes me *at all*.”

She shrugged her pale shoulders, then looked downward again.

The woman was saying something, though I couldn’t understand the words.

“We aren’t in Japan,” Merric pointed out sweetly, when she was done spitting words at him that I had a feeling were not too friendly. “And I *know* you speak English. Everyone watching is missing half the show.”

He looked up at me and *winked*. My stomach did flip flops, but I fought to keep my face blank.

“You bring shame to us,” the woman accused, pointing one taloned finger at her. “With your actions and your *lies*.”

Merric put a hand to his chest like he was offended. “My lies? I’m sorry–I thought you and I were of the same kind. Or are you hiding a different kind of tail under all that fur?”

She gasped and said something else that was most definitely not English.

Still, the kitsune spread his arms wide, expression bewildered and innocent. “*Here*? You’re going to do that in front of all these people?” He bit his lip. “Oh, I’m not sure. I don’t know you very well, and I’ve never

been much of an exhibitionist myself. Can I have a little while to think it over?”

Chuckles ran through the crowd around him, though two women with the opposing kitsune looked not at all amused.

“Your mother *cried* the day you were born,” the woman had switched back to English again.

“Probably,” he sighed. “I know my little chubby cheeks brought her such joy–“

“You show her nothing but disrespect. She should’ve taken your tails the moment they appeared, and–”

I felt cold. Very cold, like the heat had gone out and we’d been plunged into arctic winter.

Shivering, I saw I wasn't the only one.

I looked at Merric.

He hadn’t moved. He hadn’t done much other than tilt his chin upward, and perhaps the smile had fallen slightly from his lips.

But I knew the cold was him all the same.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and all of my magical senses suddenly *screamed* at me that something was wrong.

Even Yuna gripped the railing until it cracked under her fingers.

“Would you like to continue with the rest of that?” Merric murmured. The woman had stopped talking, and stared at him with wide eyes. “There’s a second part to that saying, and you look like you’re ready to spit it out.” His voice was cold, and devoid of all feeling.

He waited, his eyes on her like he *wanted* her to say it.

Like he’d jump on her when she did.

The woman looked back at her two companions, who stepped away from her.

“No?” Merric asked, a very small smile on his lips. “Do you need help remembering it?”

I was moving, then, my heels taking me across the second floor in mini showers of embers. No one seemed to notice. Yuna called after me, but didn’t follow.

Wishing I could take the stairs two at a time, I focused on where I was going even as I heard Merric speak again, his voice loud enough to echo.

“I *think* that you meant to add that you wish my father would have ended the line at its source.”

Goddess, was that really his voice? He sounded so very cold.

I pushed through the crowd of people, passing one of the council members in the process.

The red-haired woman looked me over, and grinned, before flicking her hand forward and sending two people sprawling to either side, giving me a clear path to the two near-combatants.

More than near, as I saw Merric twist his hand, the ends of his fingers turning black and crawling up his hand like veins.

While he had told me the other night that this was his true form, he'd left a few things out. His eyes had gone slitted, like a fox's and his fingers ended in claws.

Magic played at his fingertips like little sparks of lightning.

Only, lightning wasn't supposed to be *black* like that.

The gap between people put me closer to him, thankfully, and I broke free of the crowd just as Merric started to raise a hand.

He didn't even seem to notice. I reached out, hoping I wasn't going to regret it, and caught his wrist in my very tight grip.

I could *feel* the hunger of his magic, now directed at me, as the lightning and inky black seeped from him to me.

When I met his eyes, unwavering in my actions, I saw something that looked like a moment of fear.

"Enough," I murmured, hearing the disappointment of the onlookers as he recalled his power and the blackness receded from us both.

But my hand was still cold, and so was he.

"Let go," he breathed, eyes flashing in a warning.

"No."

He sneered and tried to pull away, but I wouldn't let him. "Because you don't want me making a *scene*?"

"Because I don't want you to be hurt."

His struggles ceased. Merric scoffed, and the antarctic chill faded from the air. "Please. *Her* do anything to *me?*" He glared at the woman, who had sunk back into her group of friends.

He was probably right. I'd never felt magic so dark and inherently dangerous as his.

"Are you going to let go?" He sighed, wiggling his hand.

"Are you going to go after her?" I raised my eyebrows.

The roll of his eyes was unnecessarily dramatic. “No, O great Levessaur summoner. Last of her line and great-great-granddaughter of Delphine. If you will kindly stop trying to break my wrist, I will go and get myself more champagne.” He brandished an empty glass. “As you can see, I am *out*.”

Frowning, I still didn’t let go. The kitsune looked from me to my hand. “George, I do hope that you’re aware I’m only asking out of good manners. If you’d don’t let go of me in the next couple of seconds, we’re going to have to have a chat.”

“Aren’t we already having a chat?” I loosened my grip, sure he could pull away.

He didn’t. His eyes found mine, and for the first time, he looked me over from head to foot. His mouth opened, but the look of derision and dismissal was back in full force.

“It seems our chat will have to wait.” He extracted his wrist from my grip. “You have more important people lining up to get a look at the *summoner extraordinaire*.”

I hated how mocking it sounded, and frowned.

Before I could speak, however, he disappeared into the crowd, leaving no confusion that he didn’t want to be followed.

“That was rather dangerous, don’t you think?” The head of the council moved to stand at my left shoulder. “He could’ve killed you with that little spell.”

I turned to look at her. “Is he in trouble for it?”

“If I took note of everyone in attendance who was trying to do harm here tonight, I would never get to any other business for a year,” the witch informed me. “Most just aren’t so upfront with their intentions. Normally he isn’t either. And Mitsuko has never been so good at pulling his tail with such success. I’ll have to remember to invite her next year.”

A thrill of surprise went through me. “You *wanted* them to do that?”

Her smile was sly and full of deeper intentions. “Is it wrong of me to know how to push his buttons, when he is what he is?”

“A void kitsune,” I remarked offhandedly.

“The *only* nine-tailed void kitsune,” she corrected me. “And the first. It’s quite terrifying what he can do with the power of nine tails at his disposal.”

“Why is he the only one?”

Her look was pitying. “Georgette, darling. The kitsune mostly take care of their own. If a member of a family has a quarrelsome nature, the parents of that kitsune will often cut off the child’s tails before they’ve come into their powers. Then, the parents will do the same to themselves.”

“But that’s so cruel!” I gasped. “And Merric isn’t *quarrelsome*.”

She scrutinized me before speaking again. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced.” She held one hand out to me, her black nails long and perfectly manicured. “I am Angelica Good.” She shook my hand, hers feeling cool against my skin, and dropped it.

“I’m just George,” I said, giving her a polite smile. “My mom’s the only one who still calls me *Georgette*.”

“But it is a beautiful name,” Angelica looked shocked. “I can’t believe you don’t use it in its entirety.”

I also didn’t normally walk around announcing who I was, or my great-great grandmother’s name, but I didn’t say that.

“Do you live around here?” I said instead.

She shook her head. “But for you, I could visit. Or you could come see me. I hear you’re without a coven. Have you considered starting one of your own?” She said it so casually, like it was an option.

I stepped back, feeling whiplash from her change of topic. “No, I don’t think–“

“Oh, but of course. You’d rather take over an established one, being so young. Why not do so with Collette’s? She was due for a replacement anyway.”

It was as if me killing Collette Villere, leader of the New Orleans coven before I’d come along, wasn’t that big of a big deal to her. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“I don’t want a coven,” I told her firmly. “I’m happy with how I am. My cousin and I live together, and I like it that way.”

“I still would like to introduce you to my coven someday,” Angelica shrugged. “Perhaps for my own ego. Your cousin would be welcome as well. And I’ll remember to look out for her on next year’s guest list.” She nodded thoughtfully. “Have a good night, Georgette. It was good getting to speak with you. As I said, we’ll have to do this again in a more private setting.”

She didn’t wait for a reply. She simply walked away, greeting another guest with a hug and kiss to the cheek. Her blatant ignoring of my name

preferences prickled at my skin, but there was nothing I could actually do.

Yuna rejoined me, giving me the oddest look as we walked back to the upper floor and circled the room.

“That wasn’t very smart of you, is what I should say,” the cecaelia commented finally. “His magic is very dangerous, and I doubt you would have been able to shield yourself from even a little bit of it. A kitsune with less control would have killed you without meaning to.”

“Do you know any kitsune other than him?” I asked, leaning my hip against the sturdy golden railing.

Yuna nodded. “I used to travel. I’ve met more than one kitsune, and even two other void foxes. Why?”

“Is he like them? I mean-do all kitsune act so…” I searched for the word, though couldn’t settle on the proper term.

“All foxes are tricksters,” Yuna filled in. “But Merric is certainly….unique. He’s more arrogant than any kitsune I’ve met, celestial foxes included.”

“How old do you think he is?”

Her eyes landed on mine. “I think you’ll have to ask him that yourself, but I would be willing to bet on one thing.” A small grin played at her features. “I think he’s older than our friendly vampire king. By a lot, in fact.”

“Really?” I couldn’t believe that. Cian was much more mature, and always knew how to handle a situation, from what I’d seen.

Merric was….well. Yuna had put it rather nicely. An arrogant trickster.

“I’d take that bet,” I replied. “No way Cian is younger than Merric.”

Yuna’s eyebrows shot up in authentic surprise. “You *would*? Let’s find out. The person who wins gets to ask the other person to do one thing, and they have to do it. Obviously, within reason. Also, you need to be the one to figure out their ages. I’m not asking,” the cecaelia warned.

“Fine by me,” I agreed. I was sure Indra and Akiva knew Cian’s age. And Merric was….

I turned, looking over my shoulder and scanning the ballroom.

There he was. On the same floor as me with the champagne glass still in his hand, but far across the room and leaning on the wall near an archway that led out of the room.

Maybe I could go walking with him, to see if he sniffed out any rampant chaos in the area.

So far, I hadn’t scented any of the magic taken from the killer’s victims.

But maybe leaving this room would give me more clues, if there were any to be found.

I blinked, suddenly realizing that Merric was staring at me from across the room, like some cliche scene in a movie where the villain stood ominously, obscured by distance and the crowd.

All in all, Merric *did* make a pretty good villain when he wanted to, so the comparison wasn’t far off.

“Go ask. I know you want to,” Yuna dared. “Besides…” She leaned in close, sliding an arm over my shoulders and pulling me close. “I need to think of a wonderful prize for when you lose. And…” She nudged me to turn around, and I did so, sinking back into her grip.

“Those sirens are afraid of me,” she said in my ear, obliging me and wrapping her arms loosely around my waist.

“Really?” I looked in the same directions as her, eyes flicking from one guest to another. “How can you tell….” I trailed off as my attention landed squarely on a group of fine-boned, beautiful women. All of them wore dresses that sparkled like the scales of a fish, and glanced intermittently back at my companion.

“You’re not going to do anything to them, are you?” I asked, gripping her arm lightly.

“Of course not. But I *will* go say hello.” She drew away from me, but not before brushing her lips against my shoulder and making me shudder. “Go win our bet for me, George,” she called, walking away in a very confident stride.

I blinked, surprised by the back of her dress. I’d thought she wore a silver, iridescent dress that shimmered in the lights of the ballroom, but I hadn’t seen the back. The short train lapped like waves on the floor, seemingly a really part of the ocean.

How did a *dress* look so convincingly like the *waves* ?

Magic, George, I sighed internally, not moving until she’d circled the pack of mermaids.

After allowing myself to appreciate her a little longer, I squared my shoulders and turned, inhaling deeply with parted lips to take in the scents of the ballroom.

Only the clashing smells of so many people came to my brain. While everyone’s scent was mixed with an undertone of power, there was nothing

here like I'd been feeling in the city. No bitter, burned smell. No trailing dark voodoo power.

It surprised me that I was able to almost easily pick out the scents of my friends. I hadn't thought I'd known them long enough for that, but they were as distinct to me as anyone in my family.

Cloves and the sense of heated air, for Indra.

Sand and spices I couldn't name, for Akiva.

Blood and cold forests, for Cian.

The smell of the open water, for Yuna.

But nothing for Merric.

Still, I could *see* him. He still stood at the arched entrance of the hallway, gazing into a champagne glass that was nearly empty.

When I was close enough, the kitsune looked up with the flash of a grin and turned to disappear into the hallway.

"Damn it, Merric," I mumbled. If it was just the bet I was seeking answers for, I might have let him go. But I wanted to make sure he was all right, and that his feathers had unruffled themselves, after what had happened.

My steps quickened, the embers from my heels more visible when I hurried, and followed after him.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

Merric was not in the hallway.

A few others were, mostly couples who leaned against one another and whispered private things that I worked very hard not to hear. Doors lined either side, and when I peered into an open one I found a small lounge where a group of older women dressed in clothes that might have been in fashion two hundred years ago sat and talked.

One looked up at me, scowled, and the door closed in my face. Hard.

"Okay then," I murmured, my heels clicking on the marble floor. The walls here were a dark, luxurious red with columns of gold interspaced around the doors. Surely no one *lived* here, did they? It was too much for day to day life, surely.

A woman inside smiled at me, the look in her dark eyes dangerous.

I didn't stop. I did scent the air frequently, however, but still found nothing suspicious. Though, whether I was looking for Merric or some errant telltale sign of bad magic, I wasn't sure.

Was there even anything to *find*? I wasn't sure Marinette would be too happy when I told her that, short of announcing why I was there and interrogating the gala guests, I had done everything I knew to do. Everything inconspicuous, anyway. I had a feeling turning into a wolf and getting in touch with my inner Scooby Doo would be greatly frowned upon here.

A door near the end of the hallway stood open, prompting my gaze. Something flashed, very briefly, in the doorway, and my steps slowed.

It had looked like a white furred tail.

If Merric was going to start shaking his tails at me to make me follow, we really were going to have to have a little *chat*, as he had threatened me with earlier.

But, like a good puppy, I followed the gesture. Without hesitation, I walked into the room, words ready for him when I saw his face.

And sure enough, there he was.

Sprawled on a red sofa that looked like it had been shoplifted from an eighteenth-century palace, the kitsune sat like a king on his throne.

His outfit was not inherently magical in my eyes. The high collared, black coat was unbuttoned, showing off a white shirt covered by a vest of the deepest black. His black pants were just as dark, and delicate silver buckles marched up the sides of his thighs. His boots were silver, armored much like Cian's, and I couldn't help but wonder why everyone seemed so enamored with their middle ages theme tonight.

"I'm older," he announced suddenly, catching me off guard. "She's right, and you lost."

It took me a moment to catch up. When I did, I folded my arms and closed the door behind me before entering the room fully.

"You have *got* to stop listening in on my conversations!" I snapped, only a little irritated with him. This room was somewhat like the others I'd looked into. Lush white carpet lined the floor, and three near-matching sofas were set up in a bit of a circle.

Against one wall was a floor length mirror, and on the one nearest the door was a large, dark wood piano.

It was so easy to stop and imagine us being in a different place, in a different time, dressed as we were, and in such a decadent room.

It could've even been a little romantic.

If the kitsune in front of me wasn't snickering at my words like I'd just said the funniest thing.

"I should get a little prize too, don't you think?" He asked.

Before answering, I inhaled. I hadn't been able to smell him in the ballroom, and I wondered if he was somehow keeping even that from me.

But his scent flooded my nose. He smelled of melancholy, the feel of it hitting me hard. Moreover, he smelled of something secret and forbidden, like it was hidden away in a deep forest or cave.

He smelled of the *dark itself*, I realized. Cold, forgotten places that hadn't seen sunlight in years. Like the calm before the storm that would

destroy the world.

I'd never scented him like this before, and it occurred to me that he had never *let* me.

I'd never known a person could hide their own scent, but here he was.

"Did you hear me?" His eyes slid slowly up to mine, and there was no trace of his facade here tonight.

There was just Merric, the only nine tailed void kitsune.

"What kind of prize do you want?" I asked softly, standing stock-still a few feet away from his throne.

Something was so different about him tonight, and I couldn't figure out if it was because he wasn't trying for a disguise, or if it was something else entirely.

"You won't like what I want," Merric promised.

"I don't even know if you're telling the truth," I pointed out.

"When Cian and I first met, he was human. He'll never tell you that, of course," the fox explained patiently. "I don't know if he even remembers me. I had five tails then, and he was born in the late seventeen hundreds, I believe. At most, your vampire is a few years shy of three hundred." He raised his brows as if he'd proved an inarguable point.

"And how old are you?" I pressed.

"How old do you *think* I am?"

I'd been so sure with Yuna that he was maybe two hundred at best.

Now, with his scent in my nose and the way he looked to me in this room, I had never been more sure of my own mistake.

"I don't think I can guess," I admitted. "But…" I hated when I needed to ask him things that he quite obviously found trivial. "Why is it that I can scent you now? I've never been able to, before. You've always just smelled like too much cologne and coffee."

"Because I didn't feel like letting you," he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

He was quiet, and so was I. Somewhere in the room, a clock ticked the seconds by as I stared at him.

"Angelica told me about you," I blurted out, not thinking.

"I know," he replied easily.

"About you being the only–"

"I *know*," he repeated.

"Right. You know." I looked away from him, and he sighed.

“I’ll *try*,” he relented. “Because you asked. I will try to stop hearing your conversations unless you allow it.”

“Wow. Seriously?” He’d never given me any kind of concession before. “Why? Are you mad or something?” Sudden nerves twisted in my gut, and I wished I had a hem to twist in my fingers.

It was becoming more and more apparent that my words to Aveline nearly two months ago were becoming false. She’d asked me once if I was sleeping with Merric, and I’d denounced the idea loudly and with conviction.

But that was two tailed, immature Merric. The fake him.

Now I had to admit that there was a *strong* possibility he was completely my type.

Not that it mattered, I reminded myself. My other romantic interests had all expressed their agreement to our arrangements. Merric had neither done that, nor ever expressed any interest in me.

“I’m not mad,” Merric said, confusion evident on his features. “Why would I be *mad*?” He got to his feet in one fluid motion.

“Because you’re never this easy.” He started to walk past me, and I reached out to grip his wrist. “Hey, I mean it. If something’s wrong, you can tell me. I’ll *help*.”

Or, I’d try to. What use was I in the problems of an obscenely powerful fox?

He stilled, but didn’t extract his hand from my grip.

“What did I tell you earlier?” He asked, his voice almost careful. There was a strange quality to his words I couldn’t understand.

“That if I didn’t let go, we’d have a ‘chat?’” I quoted. “First off, I’m not holding you that hard. Second, I’m really curious what this chat would be.” I was being rude, and I really should let go, but I wanted to make sure he was all right before he walked away from me. Again.

“You don’t want the chat,” Merric sighed, his yellow eyes finding mine. They were still slitted like a fox’s, and impossibly intense.

“I don’t know. Now I’m curious about the chat.” I offered him a half smile that he returned instantly.

“Three seconds remaining to avoid the chat,” he warned.

“Three, two, one?” I raised a brow. Was this him trying to warn me off again? Would he pull out the ‘don’t trust a fox’ spiel *again*? I might leave if he did.

He did not repeat the *do not trust a fox* monologue.

Instead, Merric sighed and extracted his wrist from my fingers. “No,” he mumbled, half to himself. “It’s…not the place or time for it.”

“For a *chat*?” I asked, confused. I met his eyes, and found his pupils suddenly very wide.

Something twisted in my stomach, but I wasn’t sure what the hell was going on with him.

And if he wasn’t going to tell me, there was nothing I could do to persuade him to do so.

“Fine,” I sighed, raising my hands in surrender. “If you want to stay in here and pout by yourself, that’s fine with me.” I brushed past him, my fingers slipping through the fur of one of his tails accidentally.

Did he *shudder*?

It was probably just my imagination.

The door was still just as closed as I had left it. I reached out, already thinking of how I’d ask Indra to confirm Merric’s story.

He *was* a fox, after all–

Suddenly Merric was behind me, one arm around my waist and trapping both arms at my sides.

“You can tell me to stop,” he murmured against my ear, his breath tickling my skin.

I shuddered, then said very quietly, “How can I tell you to stop, when you haven’t done anything?”

His grip on me tightened, though not uncomfortably.

“You *should* tell me to stop,” he amended, pulling me away from the door.

One of his tails slid around my waist, wrapping loosely around the bodice of my dress and prompting me to wonder what it would feel like against my bare skin.

I tipped my head back, resting it on his shoulder enough to look into his face. “What are you doing?” I asked, goosebumps trailing along my arms.

I’d thought him incapable of indecision, but there it was. Plain on his face.

Then it was gone, like it had been wiped away with an eraser.

Merric leaned down, his mouth hovering over mine as my own lips parted expectantly.

“Tell me to stop,” he said again, his words the mere breath of a whisper.

“No,” I said simply.

Merric’s other hand came around to rest at the base of my throat. He met my eyes one more time, searching, then finally-*finally–he* pressed his lips to mine.

It wasn’t exactly his mouth that I found myself focusing on. His kiss was excellent, his actions teasing as he drew my tongue against his.

No, it was what *else* he was doing.

His arm around my waist held me in a grip like steel. I couldn’t lift my own whatsoever, and that along with his tail had me locked firmly in place.

The grip at my throat tightened ever so slightly, just to give me the promise of its presence. He lifted his hand so he could grip my chin, keeping me just as I was, and just how he wanted me.

I couldn’t move at all. He had me helpless, and completely at his mercy.

That did things to me that getting tied up by Akiva had not.

Merric didn’t need rope, or anything else to have me feeling so deliciously helpless, and so helplessly out of my depth.

His kiss deepened, fingers sharp points of pressure that bordered on too much. My muscles trembled, and I found myself trying to break free of his grip so that I could reciprocate with more than just my mouth.

“Wait, *wait*,” I protested, turning away slightly. His grip slackened immediately, and I knew I could step away if I wanted. “What if someone comes in?” The door sure as hell wasn’t *locked*.

Merric snarled out a laugh. “Let them,” he hissed against my ear, pulling me tight once more and trapping me against him. “Let them *look*.” Goddess, I’d never heard his voice like this and it did very wonderful things to my body.

My thighs clenched around nothing when he spoke, and trembled when he pressed his mouth to the juncture of my neck and shoulder and bit down.

“At least let me touch you,” I begged, closing my eyes to regain some semblance of control over myself.

He snickered. “Not a chance, George.”

“Why?”

Instead of responding right away, the kitsune purred softly just under my ear, teeth skimming my skin.

“It’s not fair,” I added, with as little of a whine as I could manage.

His chuckle turned into a surprised snort. “Life’s not fair,” he pointed out. “*I’m* not fair. If I say you don’t get to touch, or that you don’t get to

move, you don’t.” He paused, then added. “Except when you tell me to stop.”

Why in the Goddess’s name would I tell him to stop?

My brain and body were unsure where we stood on this. I didn’t want him to stop-not by any stretch of the imagination-but the door was unlocked, and anyone could come in.

The idea that someone could see him doing this to me sent heat straight down to my core, and I would definitely have to examine that sudden interest later.

“I thought you didn’t like me,” I admitted, gasping when his teeth found my neck again. My knees felt like jello, and I was glad that he had his arms around me to hold me up.

In lieu of a response, he bit down harder, the wet sounds of his mouth on my skin incredibly loud to my sensitive ears.

I was totally going to have a mark.

“And-and *that* too,” I rambled, trying to focus on my words. “Merric, everyone else told me without a doubt they were okay with *everyone else*. If we’re going to–“

He sighed suddenly and let go, only to spin me around and press me to the door, his face close to mine.

“If we’re going to *what*?” He asked tauntingly, so close that I could reach out and touch him.

I started to, and he grabbed my hand, pushing it back down.

“If we’re going to do….this,” I replied.

“We can’t do much more of *this* here,” Merric sounded almost rueful. “And I’m not asking you on a date. I won’t be, either. But let me be clear-you can do whatever you want, with whoever you want. That won’t change what *I* want.”

“What do you want?” I asked, lifting my chin to gaze at him stubbornly.

His grin was a very sinful promise. He stepped forward, the line of his body hot against mine, and slid his knee in between my thighs to press firmly against my core.

I gasped, and his grin widened.

“I want to put *Georgette Levasseur,* last summoner of her line and descendant of one of the most fearsome summoners in history on her *knees* at my feet. I’m going to have you begging me for my touch and begging to

touch *me* in return. My teeth on your skin will leave marks you won't forget, and everyone else will get to see as well."

If he talked much more, with his thigh rocking against me, I was going to absolutely lose it.

My chest heaved as he spoke, my eyes wide at his promises.

"You know *why*?" the kitsune pressed.

I let out a breathless laugh. "Because you think I'm pretty and you enjoy my company?"

He chuckled along with me, then surged forward and bit my lower lip *hard*.

I yelped in surprise, but only clamped my thighs tighter around his.

"Because everyone out there got to see just how powerful and important you are. How you can make an entrance." He ran his hands down my sides and I shivered.

"Now I want to see just how lovely you are when your voice is hoarse from begging and you're about to fall apart." He pulled back suddenly, taking all of that heat with him.

I sagged against the door, a whine climbing in my throat. "Are you seriously going to–"

"It's inappropriate, George." He grinned while he smoothed out his clothes. "It'd be against the rules. And I'd hate to turn you into a delinquent like me." He paused, thinking, then went on. "I'd say I should get the same prize from you as Yuna, for making that bet so easy and all, but I've decided I don't really need anything. After all…" He reached out to run his thumb over my lip. "I bet you'll do anything I ask, anyway."

He stepped forward, then around me, grinning on his way out the door.

For a moment I stood there, sure it was a joke. That he hadn't just *left* like he hadn't been affected as well.

But he really had. He'd left me here, worked up and confused.

I needed a cold shower. And a reality check to make sure I hadn't dreamed this.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18

"*Can't you wait outside for a few minutes?*" Yuna's voice was sharp. "*Before you go stomping into some murder scene and get yourself torn up*?"

"No. No, I don't think so," I said, my eyes fixed on Nathanial. The shop owner leaned against the half-stone wall outside beside me, taking a long inhale on his cigarette.

I could almost see the anticipation and dread rolling off of him in waves.

"*Try*," Yuna snapped, and hung up.

I texted Merric again, this time just a few question marks. He hadn't spoken to me since the gala two nights prior.

Why was he ignoring me after *that*? Had I done something wrong? Not given him the answer he wanted?

Nathanial sighed, smoke curling upward from his mouth. "Are you going to wait for her?" He asked quietly.

I wavered.

One part of me *did* want to wait for either Yuna or Merric. I felt safer with them. Especially walking into a fresh crime scene. Nathanial had assured me that the police were being properly distracted, and the other voodoo priests had thoroughly checked the body and done whatever needed to be done.

So I was the last to get to look, but I didn't have a lot of time. What if something had been taken before now that I needed to see? Something that might *help?*

This would be so much easier if the voodoo community trusted me.

We couldn’t wait for Yuna, and I couldn’t stand around hoping Merric might show up when he was sending a loud and clear message that he would not be showing up.

It was just bad luck that Yuna was caught up in some business of her own. Of course, I didn’t expect her life to revolve around me, but I still wished she had been free tonight.

I also had a feeling that a few minutes meant more like twenty, though I hadn’t said it.

“I’m not going to wait,” I sighed, answering Nathanial’s question at last. “We have each other, right? We should be fine.”

“My gifts lie in the realm of healin’, *cher*,” Nathanial informed me, leading the way up to the front door. He pushed it open as I sighed.

“If something happens, I’m sure I can protect us,” I said with more confidence than I felt. “And you being able to heal is a real comfort.” Though, the idea that something might make so that I would need to *be healed* in the first place was not so comforting.

“Right, with you bein’ all those things you announced to the council and all,” he replied with a bit of a chuckle.

“Were you there?” I asked, hoping he couldn’t hear the way my heart beat in my throat at the scent of blood in the air.

“Nah, but word travels fast. You were the talk of the metaphorical town. Even Johanna said she wished she woulda’ known who you were descended from. Though, between you and me, I’m not sure if that would’ve been a good thing or not.”

“Because she knew my great-great grandmother?” I asked, figuring I knew the answer without me saying it.

“Because she probably wouldn’t have let you in the funeral at all.”

Oh.

I most certainly had not expected that.

“Did this happen like the others?” I asked instead, not wanting to delve any deeper into the subject of Johanna’s dislike of me. Maybe, if I helped solve this, she’d change her mind about me.

More than likely, she would not.

“Her magic is gone already,” Nathanial answered flatly.

I slowed, nearly stopping. “How long has she been dead?” The last woman hadn’t been dead long enough for her magic to be siphoned off, I’d figured. So perhaps this victim had been found late.

“A few hours.”

“A few hours?” My eyes narrowed. “How long after Yvenson’s death did your people check his body.”

The voodoo shop owner considered it. “Maybe half a day or so,” he said finally. “I wasn’t quite in the loop for it.”

“And his magic was still there?”

He nodded, opening the door to the house. I opened my mouth to speak again, only to get bombarded with the scent of blood.

I choked, caught off guard, and pressed my hand over my face. My eyes streamed because this was worse than *just* blood.

Something in here smelled like burnt *flesh*.

“What *is* that?” I demanded, barely taking breaths through my mouth and debating on whether it’d be better to just suffocate. Surely the burning of my lungs without oxygen would be far more pleasurable than whatever *this* was.

“It’s *burning*,” a woman said behind me.

I whirled, caught off guard, and Nathanial did as well. A talisman appeared in a raised hand, and I had to wonder at that, when he’d said his gift was good for *healing* people.

Was he going to *heal* whoever was behind us until they left?

When I saw who stood behind me, I was absolutely baffled.

It was one of the white haired girls from the gala.

Of course, I had no idea which one. All of them had the same face and white-blonde hair framing red eyes. This one looked past me, further into the house.

“You’re…one of the triplets, right?” I asked slowly.

She hummed in her throat, still not looking my way. Today she wore a long-sleeved grey shirt over a short black skirt, and socks that came up to her thighs. I couldn’t help thinking how young she looked, though I was sure she was older than me by the way she carried herself and spoke.

“What are you doing here?” She inquired, completely ignoring my question as she finally met my gaze with those eerie eyes that flickered like a dying ember. Any darker and she’d be in vampire territory.

“I’m…investigating,” I replied, unsure of what to say. With a glance at Nathanial, I went on. “Helping a friend.”

“Which is it?” She tilted her head to the side.

“It’s….both?” I offered. “Can’t I investigate for a friend–“

“Quite a lot of death in there,” she cut in. “Blood and burning and…” she took a sniff. “Dark magic. Would you like some help investigating?”

“No,” Nathanial answered, his voice tight. “We take care of our own.”

Her eyes went directly to his. “Georgette is not one of your own,” she remarked.

I cringed at the use of my full name. “I’m his friend.”

“Well aren’t I *your* friend?” She didn’t look back at me, but I knew the words weren’t meant for Nathanial.

And no. No, she was not. We’d only met *once*, after all, and whichever triplet this was, it didn’t matter. None of them had left a very good impression on me.

“I don’t think we’ve known each other long enough to be friends,” I said slowly. “I don’t even remember–“

“Tisiphone,” she said, her gaze snapping back to mine. “That’s my name. You’ve barely met Alecto, and Megaera is with Uriel.”

Wonderful. As if I cared about their whereabouts. Actually–hadn't they been here for the gala? Why were they still here?

“Why aren’t you gone?” I asked in a rush of words I should’ve organized into something more polite. “Sorry, let me try again. I thought you were here for the gala.”

She blinked, scrutinizing my face long enough that I thought she might not answer. While I waited, I shuffled back onto the porch, leaving the worst of the smell behind.

“It has been a long, long time since we got to see Cian and Indra,” she said finally, taking a few steps to stand at the top of the porch steps.

Did she mean to leave out Akiva’s name in there?

“Niall decided we should stay a little while longer. Who knows when we might see them again when we go back home.”

We stared at each other, her eyes slightly wide and unwilling to break our staring contest. I didn’t have any idea what to say to get her to leave.

Finally Nathanial cleared his throat. “That’s nice and all, but we really need to get this done. Perhaps George and you can catch up another time, Miss–“

“Do you know why a body-or part of it-is burned in a murder, Georgette?” Tisiphone inquired, not looking away and speaking as if Nathanial had not been.

I did not. But I was not a fan of her using my full name whatsoever, and swallowed the correction that rose to my lips.

“Well, I’d have to look at this one to see what the reason might be,” I said, avoiding the answer entirely.

“Do you? I suppose you *don’t* know, then. Isn’t your nose trying to tell you the answer?”

My nose wasn’t telling me much past the smell of blood, but my anxiety wanted me to get the hell out of there as fast as possible. I clenched my hand around the strap of my thigh bag, wishing she’d leave.

Then again, maybe Yuna would show up and warn this girl off. The cecaelia had said she was only a few minutes away, she was very good at making people leave.

Too bad I hadn’t thought to take lessons in Sea Witch intimidation tactics.

“Let me help you,” Tisiphone urged. “If I’m not helpful, then I shall leave. I won’t even ask why you’re helping this…” her nostrils flared as she sucked in a breath, facing Nathanial again. “*Man*.”

Was that some kind of insult similar to how it was when Yuna said it?

Nathanial answered for me. “Five minutes,” he said. “If you aren’t helpful, then you leave.”

“Five minutes,” she agreed, stepping past both of us and striding down the dark hallway.

Nathanial and I looked at each other. His expression was pained, like letting her in had caused him physical discomfort.

“Why did you let her in?” I asked in a whisper.

“Because I’m not sure we could keep her *out*,” he replied.

Oh. *Well then*.

That wasn’t very comforting. And I wasn’t sure just how she’d know anything about the crime scene.

Unless she had experience in ritualistic murder before. It was…not a very comforting thought.

“Are you two coming?” Tisiphone called imperiously, poking her head out of the door at the far end of the hallway. “It won’t be fair to start my timer until you’re here.”

“What is she even doing here?” Nathanial added, voice still soft.

I lifted my hands in confusion. “I have *no* idea.”

He flicked his fingers at me and I followed him inside, taking shallow breaths through my mouth as the scent of violent death got more and more intense.

A thought distracted me from the acrid scent, if only for a second.

Was Merric here?

I peeked into the rooms we passed, as if he might be rocking in an armchair or napping on a bed.

But he wasn't.

My heart sank slightly. If he was here, I would've valued his opinion on the situation. And I had a feeling that, if he wanted to, he could get Tisiphone to go away.

If he wanted to, of course.

Distracted, I entered the victim's room without realizing it, until my sneaker squished wetly into the carpet and my stomach informed me we were going to be very sick, very quickly.

I locked my teeth together, saliva flooding my mouth, and turned away from the room with my hand over my mouth. Holy *fuck*, it smelled bad.

When I stupidly looked down at my sneakers, I found the white lines around the bottom red with blood.

"Are you all right?" Tisiphone was beside me, searching my face like it really was a mystery why I was so physically ill.

I shook my head pointedly.

"Why?"

How did she not *know*?

How was it not supremely obvious?

I pointed at the room.

"This bothers you that much?" She walked back in, doing a good job of keeping her boots out of drying blood. "I would have thought you wouldn't mind so much, being with Indra."

What the hell did Indra have to do with any of this?

"Or perhaps…" Her eyes narrowed. "You only know him in a very selective light. Could it be that you've never seen what he and his lovers *do* in the dark?"

I had seen plenty of what they did in the dark, but I figured a detailed account of our sex life wasn't the answer she was looking for.

"I know what they are," I said levelly. "But no. If you're implying they go around slashing up and burning people in their homes, that's not a side

of them I've encountered."

And Goddess, one I hoped never to encounter.

"Hmmm." She watched me. I hated it. I *hated* being looked at like one might observe a small animal doing something strange.

Looking away from her, I glanced instead into the open room across from where the victim lay.

This room appeared to be a bathroom, with the mirror facing the hallway and the both of us.

Or rather, the *three* of us.

It seemed that Merric was here after all.

A white fox was draped over my shoulders in the mirror, though I was sure no such thing existed physically. His slender muzzle was very close to Tisiphone's face, and as I watched, he snapped lightly near her nose, then looked to my eyes in the mirror. Was he grinning?

I straightened, fighting back nausea, and turned to look at Tisiphone.

"You're not using your five minutes very well," I said, fighting not to reach up and touch where the illusory fox seemed to exist on my shoulders in my reflection.

Her eyes narrowed. "So I'm not," she agreed. "But it's very hard to offer my assumptions on what happened here when you're busy trying not to vomit in the hallway."

When I glanced at the mirror again, so did she, only to look at me with confusion writ on her features.

"What are you looking at?" The girl asked.

She couldn't see him, then.

"How green I look," I replied. I turned away, gesturing her back into the other room.

Only then did I allow myself to reach up, knowing I'd find absolutely nothing on my shoulders.

A soft, wet nose pushed into my palm, and I gasped softly, eyes wide as I glanced over.

There he was.

Merric, in his very cute and very friendly-looking fox form. His snow-white fur was soft against my jaw, and his tails wrapped very lightly around my shoulders.

He seemed to grin-something I wasn't sure a real fox could even do, and pressed his nose into my hand again.

Even amidst the blood and burnt flesh, even though I knew he was only here to feed on the victim's fear and death, I smiled.

"Thank you," I breathed.

He flicked his ears and vanished.

"Your victim was killed very….thoroughly," Tisiphone announced, walking around the body on the floor that I had as yet refused to look at.

But I had to do it, and better to rip off the bandaid now than suffer longer.

I let out a sigh and lifted my gaze to the scene in front of me.

Nathanial was right. This was different, but in more ways than just her magic being already gone.

The last woman had simply been slashed up, from what I'd seen.

This woman had been cut and *burned*.

I found it impossible to look at any part of her for too long. She was missing a hand, I discovered, when I drew my gaze away from the burns on her thigh.

The hand was at Tisiphone's feet, and it had been burned as well. One finger was gone, and I wondered just why it had been necessary to cut it off her *already severed* hand.

Swallowing rapidly, I focused on the triplet's words again.

"If she had one more injury, I would have said a threefold death," Tisiphone remarked casually. "But look." She reached down and pushed the woman's head back to reveal a slit throat.

"No strangulation marks. The burns and the cuts would've killed her on their own. A threefold death would've made me think sacrifice."

"Do you….have a lot of experience with threefold deaths and sacrificing?" I asked, trying to sound casual. All I knew about them was in the name. *Threefold*. Three killing wounds to the victim's body.

Her unimpressed gaze landed squarely on mine, and I cleared my throat.

"I don't think the hand was done for pleasure, either." She *picked it up* and examined the burnt flesh. "Look at the marks." She extended her palm, offering me the burned and *dead* hand. The singed flesh smelled even more grotesque this close. I hadn't thought that was possible.

I stared at it for all of two seconds before looking at the ceiling. "I am not touching that," I said conversationally to the ceiling.

"Right." I could *hear* the derision in her tone. Whatever. I wasn't trying to impress her, and wasn't looking to win any medals for gross things I was

willing to put my hands on.

“How strange,” Nathanial murmured. I looked down and saw him running his fingers over the hand.

They clearly both possessed a degree of professionalism I could never hope to accomplish.

“A bit sloppy, too,” Tisiphone agreed.

“Yes. But not quite enough to be adequately helpful.” He laid the hand on the floor.

“Is the finger the same?” I asked.

“Killer took it with him, I suspect. The easiest way to access all of someone’s magic is to ingest a part of them.”

“You mean extract it magically,” I corrected, repeating what I’d learned during my training as a witch. Tisiphone was right about that part-having a piece of someone made it easier to get at their magic. But it was done through spells and rituals.

“I mean *ingest* it,” Tisiphone replied. “I would assume your killer ate her finger to better absorb her magic. Extracting it magically is nice and all, but it won’t give you that person’s *everything*. Not like ingesting it will.”

I wasn’t sure how many more of her dark bits of knowledge I could handle before I lost the battle with my rebelling stomach.

“I need a bit of her *gris-gris*,” I announced, not wanting to walk off without it. “I can use it to track her magic, hopefully. I’ve been collecting them from the victims so I can hopefully find their magic.”

When I looked up, I found that Tisiphone was staring at me again.

“That’s very smart,” she admitted. “You learn the scent of their magic so that when it’s used, you can find it again.”

“Tell me you did not steal something out of Yvenson’s coffin,” Nathanial sighed.

“I, personally, did not,” I said, not lying.

When he blinked, relief on his face, I added, “You-Know-Who did.”

“The L-“ He cut himself off with a look at Tisiphone, who was very obviously watching and listening to our conversation. “Fine. I suppose as long as Johanna didn’t catch you, it’s nothing to lose sleep over now.”

“Here.” Tisiphone stood, a small bone held between her fingers.

“Of course you went for the bone,” I mumbled, taking it and sliding it gently into the small compartment of my bag.

Her eyes watched me the entire time.

“You didn’t say you had a preference,” she pointed out.

“So I didn’t.” The bone would work fine.

“We’ve been here long enough,” Nathanial’s voice was firm. “Much longer, and my people will start getting antsy. Especially with *her* here,” he threw the words at Tisiphone.

The blonde’s grin was slow and not very friendly. “I don’t recall your people having a reason to hate what I am,” she pointed out.

“Hellhounds are just as unwelcome as anyone else to stay where they weren’t invited,” Nathanial argued, confirming my suspicions about her race.

It certainly made sense why the smell of burning things didn’t seem to bother her, and why her eyes pulsed like embers.

“He’s right,” I said, before she could argue further. “I really appreciate this, Tisiphone. I won’t forget it.”

I walked with her down the hallway, watching the look on her face go to pleased satisfaction. “It was no trouble,” she promised. “I like this idea of helping you. Why not come with my sisters and I for a little bit longer? You’re using those little pieces of magic to track your killer, aren’t you? We can help.”

The two of us stepped out onto the porch, and I took a breath, relief flowing through me. Nathanial was still somewhere inside, though I had no idea what for.

And not only because we were out of that house and the oppressive smell of death.

Her sisters were outside, but they weren’t alone.

Yuna stood in the yard, stance balanced and arms crossed over her chest. Better still, Merric lurked behind her, his two orange tails flowing at his back.

“Unfortunately, she’s rather busy,” the cecaelia answered in response to Tisiphone’s offer.

One of the other sister’s shifted, her eyes fixed on the two of them.

Yuna went on, voice sharp. “But I’m sure we can work you in another time.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19

"Why is it….*we?"* One of the other hellhound triplets asked offhandedly. "Shouldn't it just be you, Georgette?" Her eyes came to rest on me as I walked past Tisiphone and over to stand with Yuna and Merric. The latter wrapped one tail around my waist as if seeking comfort, though I knew that wasn't really the case.

"Why was the invitation from all of *you?*" I asked with a shrug. "Tisiphone is one who helped me, and the one I talked to most the other night. Shouldn't it just be her?" I wasn't trying to be hostile, but they put me on edge. Tisiphone may have been helpful, but they still did not strike me as *friendly.*

The hellhound looked to Tisiphone, a small frown on her lips as she lifted one shoulder, then let it drop.

"Is that a triplet thing or a hellhound thing?" Merric asked, peeking his head over my shoulder. "Do you think you could teach me?"

"Teach you what?" I asked, looking back at him. He didn't answer, and the three hellhounds didn't give him one either.

But I could take a guess. When I watched them, it looked like I was missing a silent conversation. And by Merric's words, I had a certain feeling that I was.

"You're telepathic with each other, aren't you?" I went on.

"It's a shame you left us so quickly at the gala," the hellhound leaning against the porch railing said. "I'm Megaera, since Tisiphone says you don't remember our names. We would've told you then. It's no secret that we can share our thoughts with one another." Her smile was more genuine than either of her sisters.

That meant the remaining hellhound, the least polite one, was Alecto.

It occurred to me that Nathanial hadn't appeared in the doorway, and I had the thought that he'd gone out another way. Good for him. I didn't want to deal with these three, either.

"*I* can help you," Tisiphone said, emphasis on the *I* in her sentence. "I know about this kind of magic, more than either of them, and two noses are better than one. Neither of them could track like you and I could."

Why in the world did she want to be so helpful?

"Are you sure it'd be you doing the helping?" Merric asked, speaking happily once again. "I bumped into your *bokor* the other night. Really dark aura, don't you think? All swirly and stormy and…" he trailed off, making dramatic, swirling motions with his hands. "I bet he's really good at this kind of thing."

"Uriel would be glad to help," Tisiphone agreed. "All you have to do is ask." Her eyes were on mine again. The *Bokor* who'd been with her and Niall at the gala was incredibly low on my list of people to call for help.

On the one hand, that was a stupid idea. I didn't know anything about Tisiphone's group of preternaturals. The only one of them who had inspired some small bit of goodwill in me had been Niall, and he wasn't here. Their B*okor* had been unsettling, and these three weren't much better.

But people were dying. Voodoo or not, people were *dying*.

"Why do you want to help?" I asked in a very neutral tone.

Tisiphone blinked, then looked taken aback. "You're *really* asking me that?" She said, sounding offended.

"Yes?"

"Because death like this is *wrong*," the hellhound said, sounding more forceful than I'd anticipated. The other two nodded their agreement. "Think of me what you want, but I wouldn't do this. And I wouldn't associate with anyone who did. We don't kill for the fun of it, and what reason can you think of that we would need more power?"

"What about your B*okor*?" I pressed. "Merric is right. This seems very up a dark priest's alley."

Megaera growled suddenly, her eyes flaring and teeth lengthening to fangs.

I stepped back as Yuna rounded on her.

"Don't tempt me," the sea witch warned. "I already don't like you."

“We’re not trying to steal your *girlfriend*,” Alecto promised, leaning on one of the porch’s columns, seemingly without a worry in the world. “So you can put your fangs away, cecaelia. Or any other parts of you that might hurt us.”

“And we’re not sure why *you* care so much, *nogitsune*,” Alecto added. “What’s a witch when you could have anything you want?”

“Anything I want?” Merric hunched his shoulders. “I don’t know about that. And it’s not like I have any lofty ambitions. But I’m always willing to hear suggestions?” His orange ears wiggled.

“Nogitsune?” I murmured to him under my breath.

His eyes darkened in a warning, but before he could speak, Alecto answered first.

“It’s just what he’s called. Though I suppose there’s no correct designation for *him*. Being the only one of his kind, and all. Is that lonely? Is that why you stay around here? A summoner is rare, after all. But you’re…what’s the term I’m looking for?” She made a show of pondering the word, one finger tapping her lower lip. “Critically endangered?”

I grabbed his arm before I could think to stop and consider our options.

Just like the night at the gala, Merric was so very cold. When I looked down I saw black veins creeping up my fingers, and the feeling of it was just short of painful.

I’d never had frostbite before, but I had a feeling this was similar. Only worse.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t try to upset my friends,” I said, wondering if I should hook my fingers into Yuna’s belt and tow her back as well.

“My sisters should learn some *manners*,” Tisiphone snapped, her fangs on display as she growled at both of her sisters.

Alecto and Megaera barely spared her a sideways glance.

“I’m sorry,” Tisiphone went on, her teeth back to normal. “Please give us all a second chance? I promise we’ll act better.”

Should I? Some part of me said *hell no*, but rationally I understood why Yuna and Merric would put anyone on edge. They weren’t exactly cuddly, baby supernaturals.

“If you really want to help me for the reasons you say, I’d appreciate it,” I told them, ignoring Yuna’s sound of protest and the way Merric shook his head in disbelief.

But I needed all the help on this I could get, and neither Merric nor Yuna knew as much about these killings as Tisiphone herself seemed to.

Besides. The faster I could find who was doing this, the fewer people would end up victims.

I took a breath, preparing myself to diffuse the situation as best as I could.

And stopped.

There it was. On the air, the scent of dark magic wrapped itself around me like a suffocating blanket. It didn't carry the scent of Yvenson or the first victim I'd found, but there was something bad going on.

And it wasn't that far from where we were now.

"Why don't you come have dinner with us?" Alecto pressed. "Tisiphone is right. Killing for the sake of killing is wrong. But we need more information to help you." Her eyes went from Yuna to Merric. "You can bring your friends," she added, like the words were being pulled from her throat involuntarily.

Did she smell it too? Did Merric? Werewolves had stronger senses of smell than their more inherently magical counterparts, so it was very possible that they did not.

My answer was too fast. "No." I swallowed. "Not tonight."

Not now, when I needed to pull the bone out of my bag and compare the scent of the dead woman's magic to what was fLoating through the air.

Megaera's eyes narrowed. "Really? You're busy with something else?"

"Yes," I said.

"What?" Tisiphone demanded.

I wasn't sure why the three of them were so pushy, but it was really beginning to make me rethink my earlier stance on letting them offer any kind of help.

"With me," Merric answered, surprising me with the words.

"With him," I agreed. "We're *busy*. And honestly, you three are really being too much. If you want to help, then I'll talk to you another time, when I don't already have plans."

Yuna shifted, her eyes on Megaera as she studied the hellhound.

Tisiphone's face fell. She glanced at Alecto, who carefully schooled her features into something less irritated. "You're right. I'm sorry. We've been a bit on edge, truthfully. We haven't adjusted too well to being here just yet," Tisiphone admitted.

She sent me an apologetic smile that I accepted with a polite one of my own.

“We’ll try to find you again when you’re less busy.” As she spoke, she walked off of the porch, her sisters falling into step with her. “Until next time, Georgette.”

Only when she and the others were out of sight, did I sigh and mutter. “It’s *George*.”

“You did introduce yourself as Georgette,” Merric pointed out.

I looked at him, doing a double-take when I saw he wore his favorite facade. “Why do you look like that?” I couldn’t help but ask.

His brown eyes found mine. He blinked, unimpressed. “Would you like to tell me why you so urgently wanted to get rid of them?” He inquired instead of answering my question.

“Because I smell something.” Digging in my thigh bag, I procured the tiny bone and brought it up to my nose.

Why in the Goddess’s name couldn’t she have gotten me a stone or a charm? Why a *bone*?

I inhaled, scenting the bone twice over before tucking it away again.

This time, when I took a deep breath of the air around me, I was able to distinctly scent this woman’s magic mixed in with whatever the hell was going on.

“George?” Yuna rounded on me, her gaze intense.

“The dead woman in there had her magic stolen,” I explained, then whirled to face Merric. “Wait-you were there before me, weren’t you? Did you see who did it?”

“No,” he denied. “I would’ve told you long before now and ended this little Loa-errand-girl job of yours if I did know. Every time I’ve shown up, whoever did this has been long gone.”

“But…” I swallowed, unsure if I wanted to ask the question. “Were the victims *dead* when you showed up?”

He stared at me. I stared back, and even Yuna was quiet behind me.

“Pick your questions better,” he said at last. “Find something less….obvious to ask me.”

“But Merric, you could’ve done something. Not save them, I guess, but couldn’t you *ask* them who did this to them?”

“Stop asking,” he warned. “I mean it.”

“No. I’m not going to *stop asking*–“

“When I got here tonight, that dead woman in there was on her way out. What was I supposed to ask her, when her lungs were burned from whatever he seared her flesh with? The first night you showed up, she was almost dead as well. Her throat had been *cut* and I don’t think I know sign language well enough to ask your questions for you.”

His voice never rose, but his now-yellow eyes were goading. “Please do try to remember, George, that while I’m being *nice* in accompanying you in and out of fox form, I am under no obligation to do so. *I’m* not the one who bargained with a Loa and probably came out with the short end of the stick.”

I took a very deep breath that burned my nose with the smell of bitter magic and nodded. Swallowing, I told myself that I would not let myself get angry with the kitsune.

It was futile. I couldn’t turn Merric into something he wasn’t. I didn’t even *want* to. If I tried with him, then I’d have to try with *all* of them.

And I wasn’t sure I was exactly the most qualified person to decide when we were going to act like saints.

Not after Collette.

“You’re right,” I agreed. “I appreciate any help you’re willing to give me. Both of you.” I looked between them. “So, uh. I’d *really* appreciate it if you came with me while I try to track this.”

“You know you don’t have to ask,” Yuna assured me.

We both looked at Merric.

He glanced up, then grimaced. “I really shouldn’t indulge you,” he sighed heavily. “If I say yes now, then you’ll start expecting me to show up wherever you put down your little savior flag, George. And that’s not really my *thing*.”

“There might be lots of chaos if we find the person?” I offered.

Merric rolled his eyes. “Well, of course there will be. That’s a given with you around.” He pondered it dramatically, one finger tapping his lips.

“Just this once,” he agreed. “But only because I’m here and I could use some entertainment.”

“Thank you.” I smiled, twisting the fabric of my t-shirt between two fingers.

He didn’t bother to return it.

“Where are we going?” Yuna was holding her sword, and I had finally decided that she summoned it with magic whenever she was on land and

planned on a fight. She rested the sheathed blade over one shoulder, her attention on me.

“That way,” I said with certainty, pointing towards more houses. “It’s not far. The scent of her magic is really strong.” Stronger than it had been when I’d tried this before.

A surge of anticipation shot through me, and before I knew it, my wolf ears and tail were visible.

My lips parted, being pushed apart by sudden sharp fangs in my mouth.

I was going to find the person doing this, and at the very least, not let them go until the Loa had whoever it was in their clutches.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20

It was so difficult not to let my wolf take over.

She and I were in agreement about this. Killing for the sake of killing was *wrong*. It didn't matter what kind of magic those people who were murdered practiced. Innocent was innocent.

My wolf tried to convince me that I could do this so much easier if I let George-the-wolf out to play. Then I'd have speed, strength, and my *teeth* to teach this person a lesson.

And to make sure they didn't get away.

"Are you sure you know where we're going?" Merric asked, keeping pace with me as I jogged down the darkening street.

"I don't know this part of town," Yuna remarked. "But something feels off." She glanced at Merric. "Why ask her? You can feel it too."

He frowned, but didn't ask again.

Another scent was beginning to intermingle with the acrid tang of magic, but I couldn't place it right away.

I'd breathed this smell in before. I was sure I had.

Memories flashed through my brain, and I opened my mouth to speak.

Yuna beat me to it.

"We're getting close to the lake," the cecaelia announced, slowing to a walk when I did as well.

"I thought you said you'd never been here," I murmured, eyes wide as I looked at the industrial buildings all around us.

Gone were the residential blocks and cute front yards. No, the neighborhood we'd been in had given way to this place, with its large, dumpy buildings and general lack of pleasing aesthetic.

The scents of machines and old grease-filled my nose, making me sneeze.

“I can feel the water,” Yuna explained. “It’s nowhere near where I live, but this is definitely Lake Pontchartrain.” She hesitated. “Are you sure about this? I can’t help remembering the last time we did something that reminds me a lot of our current activities.”

“You mean where we all almost died until Merric crushed that wendigo’s face with his hand?”

The kitsune in question snorted at my words.

“Worked out then, didn’t it?” I stopped walking, my eyes sliding from one building to the next.

While I was still able to smell the dead woman’s magic, the traces of it were twisted up with the lake and the industrial scents that threatened to make me sneeze again.

“Whoever it is, they’re here somewhere,” I promised. “I just don't really know where.”

“Do you have something better than that?” Merric asked impatiently. “Or just *somewhere here?”*

“Somewhere *here*,” I repeated. “As in, I don’t think the person is further than the buildings currently around us.” I lifted my hand to gesture at the three buildings in front of us, my heart pounding in my chest. “We could split up?” I offered.

“That *screams* bad idea,” the kitsune laughed. “For you. Not us. To be clear. She and I would be fine. You–“

“I get it,” I interrupted. “Seriously.” He didn’t need to rub it in, as he was so keen on doing.

“We can split up,” Merric amended. “But you two should go together. I’ll check this out.” He didn’t wait for an answer before slipping into the shadows of the building to my right.

I tried to watch him go, but when he passed through a particularly deep shadow, the kitsune just vanished.

“I wish I could disappear like that,” I muttered, still not seeing any sign of him.

“He’s just showing off,” Yuna sighed. “He could’ve used the door like the rest of us. Which do you want to go in?”

We had two options. The square cement building with an assortment of broken windows, or the *other* square cement building with broken windows

and a weird stain on the door.

"That one," I said, pointing at the one with the stain. "It's the more obviously creepy one. If you squint, that stain could be blood."

Yuna walked forward, running her fingers lightly over the old steel of the thick door. "It's not blood," she promised, pushing it open until the door swung open on its hinges with a very ominous creak.

The scent of metal was much stronger in here, as expected.

But so was the bitter tang of bad magic.

And blood.

"I'd be willing to bet we found it," I murmured, looking around the large room. Machinery cut off my view of most of it and created what looked to me like a large maze.

Above us, wire catwalks spanned the length of the open room, suspended only on chains.

I didn't like this place whatsoever.

"I'll go this way," I offered, gesturing towards the right side of the building.

"Maybe we should go together," Yuna suggested after a brief hesitation.

I shook my head, glancing at her in the dim light. "I'm not a child, Yuna." As if to prove my point, I drew the Chariot card to my hand. Magic swirled and sparked around my fingers, and in a burst of power, I had the Form of the Chariot beside me, her winged arms folded over her chest and her feathered head bowed.

I put a hand on the white-feathered woman, and she stood gracefully, chin lifting as she spread out her magical awareness in the room.

Everything in here was muddied in black magic, but I couldn't tell where the source of it was.

I sent her in front of me, her steps silent on the stone floor as she peered around one of the large, dormant machines.

"Be careful," Yuna insisted, reaching out to hold my wrist in her long fingers. "Don't make me have to play the hero tonight."

With a grin, I gripped her wrist in return. "I'll be fine. I can do this. I can take care of myself."

Even if I didn't quite believe the words, should something really nasty appear, I refused to look like I was afraid in front of either of them.

I was so *tired* of all of my lovers treating me like I was made of glass and prone to accidents at every step.

The cecaelia didn’t argue. I heard the scrape of metal and turned to see the reflection of her unsheathed sword over her shoulder as she stalked off into the darkness.

Finding a light switch beside the door, I flipped it on and felt my stomach unclench when the lights flickered to life.

Just as quickly, however, a frown found my face, and I sighed.

There were only a few working lights on the walls and two overhead. It was better than nothing, but just barely.

With a push of my magic, I sent the Chariot ahead of me, using my magic through her to look for anything out of the ordinary.

As she rounded the corner of a large machine, I followed, my hand brushing the cold metal.

What were these used for, exactly?

To me, they looked like hulking behemoths with a bunch of unmarked or faded levers and buttons. I couldn’t fathom what their use was, and the dust on them suggested they hadn’t been turned on in a very long time.

Something tickled the edge of my magical awareness.

I sniffed the air, tilting my head back to get a better look, but that was absolutely fruitless. This whole place smelled like dark magic. It permeated my senses and clogged up my nose too badly for me to scent where it was coming from.

Perhaps if I shifted into a wolf, however, that wouldn’t be the case.

Or if I *had* a wolf.

But that was a very slippery slope with a *very* steep incline.

Especially with Yuna and Merric here.

No. I wouldn’t attempt to call–

Stepping out from behind one of the machines, I was very shocked to see a man leaning against the wall.

I gasped, magic flooding my palms as I prepared myself for a fight.

The bald, too-thin man smiled, then vanished.

Like he’d never been there at all.

“Oh fuck,” I murmured. I looked at the Chariot, who had turned when I made noise but hadn’t alerted me to his presence.

Why hadn’t she?

She couldn’t ‘see’ in the traditional sense, and I couldn’t use her to see either. But her Form could sense anyone around us, and she should’ve sensed him much sooner than I’d found him with my eyes.

My breath came in short pants, and I told my beating heart to chill out.

Sure enough, when I put my hand against the wall where I'd seen the guy, there was nothing. No trace of magic. No remnants of body heat.

Like he'd been a ghost.

Or an illusion.

I turned again, only to catch sight of the same man, this time standing very close to the Chariot, who ignored him.

"This is a very powerful bit of magic, isn't it?" He asked, making a show of leaning to one side to look at the Chariot's face.

"Who are you?" I asked. If the Chariot wasn't reacting, then he wasn't really here, I reasoned.

Where was Yuna? Could she hear him?

"I'm Nobody," the man shrugged. "Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter." I called my magic to my hands again, power churning against my skin. "If you're the one–"

"Are you Nobody too?" His wide, glassy eyes found mine and stayed fixed to my gaze.

Sweat glistened at his skin, and everything about him seemed sickly.

"No," I said quietly. "I'm not Nobody." I wasn't even sure what that meant unless it was the insult it sounded like. "Did you kill those people?" I asked. "Are you what *smells* in here?"

His eyes shifted from one side to the other, as if searching for something I couldn't see. A shaking hand lifted to his face, and the illusory creature gnawed on already-bitten nails.

"I'm Nobody," he said again. "Not even good enough for the insects."

What in the *world* was he talking about?

He saw my hand twitch, and his hand fell to his side again.

"Go home," he whispered. "Go home, go *home*–" He disappeared again.

My heart beat hard against my ribs, almost painfully, and I fought back the chills his words sent through my body.

Whatever I'd expected to find, this wasn't it.

With barely a thought, I summoned the Devil, and seconds later, her ragged ominous Form stood beside me.

She gazed around, her face emotionless.

The Chariot approached, drawn in by my own worry, no doubt.

But how was I supposed to look for him, with two Forms that couldn't smell him out or actually see him?

Still, I walked, weaving in and out of the machines and the tools of the old warehouse.

Before I knew it, I was in another room entirely, and fumbled for the light switch beside me.

Nothing.

My body told me to run. To leave. To go find one of the others because *clearly,* I was out of my depth here.

But I stayed still, lifting my hand and gathering my magic in my palm until it glowed like a soft lamp. I focused on that, on steadying the pulsing light into something sustainable and not draining.

I looked up.

"*Go home!"* The man screamed, looming close to me. My witch light illuminated every sunken hollow of his thin face, and I clamped a hand over my mouth in order not to scream.

He wasn't really here–

His fingers gripped the wrist that held my light in a clammy, raptor-like grip.

I choked on my shriek.

Both of the forms reacted, turning to me and lunging towards the man who held my arm.

By the time they were anywhere near him, he was gone once more.

How had he been able to do that? He'd been an illusion until he'd grabbed me, and only then had my Arcana recognized him as *real.*

Unfortunately, it looked like the two of them weren't going to help me at all.

Even *I* wasn't sure how to fight an illusion, and I didn't think letting them stumble around with me in the near-dark was working so well.

I sighed, and the two of them vanished in glittering particles of magic.

The Moon card had always reacted strangely. Like it was really there and understood more than the empty puppets of my other two.

What if I could use it to track this man down?

"This is such a bad idea, George," I murmured, glad neither of the other two were here to argue with me. I hadn't heard Yuna yell, and Merric hadn't blown up his search zone, so I had a feeling that I was the only one who'd seen this *Nobody* man.

Lifting my hand, I drew power to my fingers until I held the physical card of the Moon. The black card was as elegant as always, its two wolves perfectly mirrored and howling at the full moon above them.

I tried very hard not to flash back on what had happened to Colette… and failed.

“Please don’t do that again,” I murmured, the card vanishing and showering the floor in magical sparks.

As before, the ethereal wolf seemed to form from those sparks, finally standing waist high with its head dipped in a stalker’s pose, ears pointed at me.

Its eyes reflected the light in my hand, and I drew my arm away from the softly glowing figure.

It stayed put, and the glow of the wolf’s eyes didn’t fade at all.

Was it reflecting the light or something else altogether?

The jawbone necklace tingled against my skin, warming until it was hot enough to be noticeable but not painful.

Perhaps that was some kind of warning. I held my breath, waiting for the small necklace to do more than be warm.

The wolf looked at me. I stared back.

Nothing happened.

“That went better than I thought,” I murmured, wondering if the Loa’s gift was only there to remind me of what I was doing. I wasn’t sure how it would help, but maybe I was just missing something.

Letting out my held breath, I crouched down to look at the wolf, unnerved by the look in its eyes.

“I don’t know if you understand me, since I really can’t seem to control you like I can the others,” I murmured. “But I could really use your help.” I blinked, magic tickling my palms, and suddenly there were two wolves.

The necklace got a little hotter.

Uh oh.

“Okay, please don’t do that.” I fought to regain control over my nerves. “Just help me find this guy. If you can. If you could–“

They both wheeled around and plunged headlong into the room, their noses to the floor as they broke apart and began to sniff.

Holy shit. Was this actually going to *work*?

One of the wolves barked quietly, scratching at a closed door at the side of the room.

I followed, and recoiled at the sight of stairs.

“Going up seems unwise,” I muttered as both wolves brushed past me to ascend the stairs.

I couldn’t *not* think about those swinging catwalks and the way they didn’t look at all safe.

But I followed the wolves anyway, trusting them not to lead me into peril.

Or at least to lead me to the kind of peril I was looking for.

The stairway echoed with my footsteps, though the wolves made no sound on the floor. The only light I had was the one in my hand, and it showed me only dirty walls with peeling paint and years of neglect.

An open door sat at the top of the stairs, and I took a step toward it, only to be stopped by one of the wolves moving to stand in front of me, teeth bared in a silent growl.

Movement flickered at the edge of my witch light. When I pushed more magic into it in order to make it brighter, I saw the man from downstairs standing in the *middle* of one of the catwalks.

“When is a door not a door?” He asked, head tipped back to look at the ceiling.

“What?” I demanded, edging forward until I could stand in the open doorway.

He sighed, disappointment heavy on his shoulders. “When is a door… not a door?” He repeated slowly, as if I might not have understood the first time.

“Is that a riddle?” I considered yelling for Yuna, but I didn’t want to spook him or start a fight.

“When is a door not a door?”

Couldn’t he say anything else?

One of the wolves at my side bared its teeth in a silent snarl, the fur along its back raised threateningly.

The man looked down suddenly, blinking in surprise as if he hadn’t known I was there.

“Are you the one who killed those people and stole their magic?” I demanded, ignoring the stupid riddle.

Now the man stared at the wolves. I almost buried my fingers in their fur, but it was hard enough to keep my magic from them *without* physical contact.

“Are you threatening us?” He murmured in a strange voice, his eyes finally finding mine.

Downstairs, I was sure his eyes had been blue. But when I looked at him as he spoke, there was no pupil at all. His eyes were a solid, milky white that looked at me without seeing.

“If you are the person who did that, then I am most definitely threatening you,” I promised quietly, both wolves advancing a step.

“How strange…” His head tilted to the side, lolling like it was barely being held by any kind of muscle. His arms lifted, palms up, and spread in front of him in a confused gesture. “We don’t feel very threatened.”

He took a step back, then another. I followed, stepping onto the landing that led onto the unstable catwalks.

I wasn’t afraid right here, but I was terrified to take a step forward, onto those catwalks.

No way would I put myself in such a place voluntarily.

“*I’m Nobody.*” His voice was back to its scratchy, whining tone.

“So you’ve…said…” I looked up at him again and saw his eyes were back to their grey-blue hue.

“When is a door not a door?” He asked for what had to be the tenth time.

“I don’t *know!*” I strode forward again, my shoes near the start of the catwalk. “And I don’t *care*–“

He held up a finger and put it to his lips. I quieted, but only because of what I saw on his hands.

They were covered in bloody symbols that shimmered with blackness in my magical sight.

And that *really* wasn’t good.

“A door is not a door…when it’s *ajar*,” he explained.

Something skittered on the ground behind me, *just* behind the open door that I’d stepped through.

I didn’t want to turn around.

My blood ran cold. I could *feel* the wrongness at my back, and I did not want to confront it.

But I had to.

I whirled around, the wolves crossing to face off against this new threat.

Whatever I had expected, it was nothing close to what stood at the top of the stairs.

It was easier to look at the *thing* in pieces.

A human torso and legs dragged the thing forward, though no human had talons like *that*.

The mouth had never been human. Exposed bone showed off what looked like a large animal jaws stapled to a man's skull. His eyes were sewed shut, and my heart tried to break free of my ribs as I looked at this abomination.

Two arms hung at its waist, while another two, these longer and tipped in knife-claws, dragged behind it.

It even had a fucking *tail*. As if it needed another bladed appendage.

"You're a necromancer," I breathed, and when I said the words aloud, the panic rose in my throat like bile.

The *necromancer* giggled, though it sounded like he was stifling the sound. When I dared to look at him over my shoulder, I saw that he had one hand stuffed in his mouth, and his shoulders shook with mirth.

Holy *fuck*.

What in the Goddess's name was wrong with him?

The sound of rushing, clumsy steps alerted me to the mistake I had made in taking my eyes off of the abomination. When I did manage to look for it again, it was much closer to me, its patched together jaws wide and reaching.

I stumbled backward, teetering on the edge of the landing and avoiding the jaws by just a hair's breadth.

But I didn't see the tail.

The surprisingly strong appendage hit me in the stomach when the monster whirled, sending me tumbling backward. My back hit the catwalk, arms reaching for the railings. Growls sounded in my ears, but I couldn't think about that.

Not while I was trying to get my bearings on this damn thing with it *swinging* in the air twenty-five feet above the ground.

"Yuna!" I screeched, scrambling to my feet. "*Merric!*" It wasn't time to try to figure this out myself. Not with a necromancer and its pet here.

I focused on the fighting in front of me, confused for a second on how there were now three wolves, when it had been two just a moment ago.

When I tried to grab for my magic, I made a very unpleasant discovery.

I had no control over the wolves at all.

Just like what had happened in the cemetery.

They darted in at the creature, keeping it away from the catwalk and *me*.

I didn't need control for them to protect me, Did I? I couldn't use much more of my magic when they were loose, but they seemed capable of at least buying me some time.

"George! Are you–" Yuna appeared on the landing, assessing the situation.

And all I could do was watch as a wolf slowly materialized from nothing in front of her, head down.

"No!" I yelled, fighting to rein it in. "She's our *friend!"*

The wolf didn't seem to care. It stared at her, unmoving.

"Call it off, George," Yuna called. "Call it off so I can help."

"I can't!" My hands tightened around the railing. I couldn't call them off. I couldn't do *anything* now that I'd lost control of them!

It was happening again. Just like it had in the cemetery.

Only this time, my friends were in real danger. Not just watching in horror from the sidelines.

And one of them could very well get *hurt*.

The heat of the jawbone at my throat turned searing, prompting me to gasp. I reached up, but long before I could even consider yanking off the necklace, the talisman sent what felt like a lightning bolt through me.

My witch light, somehow still in my hand, vanished.

And so did all of my wolves.

I'd been momentarily disconnected from my magic, like a computer undergoing an emergency restart.

It would've been useful and welcome…in other circumstances. And I was definitely grateful that Yuna was no longer staring down an uncontrollable piece of my magic.

The necromancer's creature had gotten free, and its head turned to me like it could see me through its stitched together lids.

"This is such poor timing," I murmured, backing up on shaky legs as the catwalk swung under me.

It shuddered *hard* when the creature put its claw-tipped hands on the end of it and dug in until the metal creaked and *popped*.

Yuna yelled, her sword arcing towards it in a strike that would've been lethal.

If it had connected.

But the monster moved a moment before her, and before she could recover, it found its target.

Me.

I screamed, but it was already too late.

The amalgamation of dead things already had me off the catwalk and into the open air above the machinery.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 21

My ears rang.

Vision blurred, all I could see was a dim light somewhere far above me. The ringing in my ears seemed to pulse, and it was all I could focus on.

Until I drew in a deep breath and my lungs screamed in protest.

Followed by my entire body shrieking its disagreement with me moving at all.

At least I wasn't *dead*.

I tried to sit up and almost fell.

But I was *not* going to confirm the idea that some of my lovers had of me being a fragile flower. I was not done.

Setting my teeth against the pain, I forced myself to sit upright.

Blood ran in rivulets from my nose, and I hoped to the Goddess I hadn't swallowed enough of it to make me sick. That was all I needed right now.

Something loud banged over my head. A light flickered.

I stumbled to my feet, and this time did fall.

My leg was definitely broken and taking longer than it should to heal.

Which meant that I had sustained a *lot* of injuries too quickly, if my healing was already starting to stall.

I probably wouldn't handle another fall like that very well.

When I could at last stand without falling over, I tipped my head back to look above me.

The monster was still on the catwalk, surprisingly fast for how ungainly it appeared. It dodged and wove around Yuna, who chased after it with her sword flashing.

“It’s so fast…” I breathed, knowing that no one was listening.

A very familiar giggle found my ears, and my gaze landed on the necromancer again.

He still seemed to be trying to stifle himself, but I could hear the snickering sounds he made.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, my voice barely more than a whisper.

“Everybody…” he licked his lips like they’d suddenly gone dry, and shuddered. “Everybody needs a Renfield.”

A *what*?

What in the Goddess’s name was a Renfield? And what in the world did that have to do with any of *this.*

“Would you like to hear a riddle?” He twisted his hands together and took a step towards me.

“No.” I took a step back. The last riddle he’d asked me had resulted in that *thing.* I didn’t particularly want to hear another.

That didn’t please him. He held up his shaking hands, one finger going to his lips again. I didn’t say anything, but only because I didn’t know *what* to say.

“If you *have* me,” he began deliberately, taking a step closer to me. “You want to *share* me.” He took another step forward, and I mirrored it by taking a step back.

“If you *share* me.” He leaned forward, catching my eyes with his intense stare. Almost like he was trying to tell me something with his body language.

Unfortunately, I didn’t speak crazy-necromancer.

“Then you haven’t got me.” He straightened and wrung his hands together again. “What am I?”

One of the catwalks above us came undone from one of its chains. I watched it swing precariously through the air.

Then it dropped.

While it was nowhere near us, I winced at the impact, and a bolt of fear went through me. Was Yuna all right?

A figure leaped from the monster’s back. It was her, and she looked completely fine.

Thank the Goddess.

“You aren’t *listening* to me,” the necromancer snapped. “If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, you haven’t got me. *What am I*?” His words got louder until finally he was shouting.

“I don’t know! I don’t do riddles!” Nor could I really focus on this one, when I needed to get back to Yuna.

“No, *no!”* The man dragged his fingers through his hair. “Stop-you aren’t *listening to me*. I said–“

“A secret.” A cold voice cut him off, and I looked past him to the swirling white tails. “You’re a secret.”

The necromancer’s shoulders fell again. “Very, *very* good,” he praised. “Oh, that’s so good. I’m a *secret.”* He turned just enough to keep us both in his view. “But of course you’d know that. It’s an easy one for you.” He stared at Merric as he said it.

“Is that your secret?” Merric glanced upward towards the creature skittering across the walls. “I bet the council would love to know what you made that thing out of.”

“Don’t be so predictable. And I wasn’t *really* asking you. Find yourself something to play with.”

Merric’s brows rose. “I’m not a child to play with toys,” he informed the man. “But if you think…” He trailed off, and I saw it.

A thin, whip-like tail wound up his ankle, all the way to his thigh.

Our eyes met. My mouth opened, but I didn’t have time for the warning.

The tail tightened and *yanked* him back into the darkness.

“*Merric!”* I screamed, trying to run past the necromancer to get to him.

The man reached out, quick as a snake, and gripped my arm.

“Stay-where-you-are–“ he hissed, eyes wide and glassy.

Sweat dripped from his forehead. “Why don’t you understand? Don’t you *want* to understand?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” I ripped my arm free of him, my teeth elongating into fangs. “I don’t *want* to understand why you killed those people! I don’t want to understand why you made these *things!*” I stumbled back a step, then another, and my claw-tipped fingers curled.

“Yes, you will,” the necromancer said. “I’ll make you understand.” His gaze switched to something over my shoulder and the hair at the back of my neck stood up.

Thankfully, I was faster than the tail that tried to grab me the same way it had Merric. But I wasn’t quicker than the blow from the monster’s hand.

The surprising force of it sent me reeling, and I fell back into a pile of junk, out of sight of the necromancer.

He sighed, and the creature climbed the machine nearest me. It looked very similar to the one that Yuna fended off on the catwalks, but *larger*.

And two-headed.

It snarled down at me, but the sound ended in a choked scream as something hit it from behind, distracting it.

The monster whirled, and disappeared.

I didn't waste any time. Stripping out of my clothes, I was already shifting by the time I was on my feet. All of my remaining aches faded, though that wasn't much of a relief.

I really needed to be careful.

Somehow I'd forgotten about the jawbone necklace, but when I pawed at my throat in confusion, I found that the chain had grown with my shift, and the talisman sat nestled in my fur.

Part of me was glad. That meant I couldn't lose it.

The other part of me wanted to chuck it into a corner and forget about it, after what had happened with the wolves.

I scrambled over the machinery, hauling myself up onto it with claws made for grappling, more like a tiger's than a real wolf's.

Merric had pulled the creature off of me, and now two of them crept around him, their tails lashing.

"You just can't seem to *look*." The necromancer was up on the machinery as well. He crouched down beside me.

But he wasn't touching me. He was looking at the fox.

"Maybe there are just too many obstacles in the way."

The two monsters converged on Merric, giving him no quarter as they fought to pin him down, their teeth snapping at his throat.

I was running before I could think. I leaped across the machinery, claws digging into the metal as I lunged from the last one and onto the two-headed *thing* that had Merric on the ground.

It came away with a growl, my fangs in its throat.

The other was thrown off as well, blackness engulfing its features. It struggled with the veiny, dark substance that twined around it, shrieking and crying out in a voice like a child's that sent a chill of fear down my spine.

But I couldn't focus on it anymore.

The two-headed abomination shook me off, lowering itself into a crouch as I landed and did the same.

I snarled a challenge, teeth bared, and it repeated the gesture with a voice not made for the noise. Its growl was like rusty gears scraping against one another, and its knife-like claws dug harshly into the concrete below us.

Merric got to his feet, blood running sluggishly down one arm. He glanced my way, indecision plain on his face.

“You should get out of here, George,” Merric said flatly, circling the monster that did the same to him. “There’s no shame in running.”

I stared at him incredulously.

He stared right back.

Until his abomination lunged. He dodged its claws, catching the thing with claws of his own and plunging his fingers into its chest.

It screamed, writhing as black veins of power spread from where Merric’s hand impaled it. The magic spread faster and faster, twining around its limbs and constricting it into a painfully unnatural position.

Bones snapped, loud to my sensitive ears, and the two heads of the one in front of me turned to look at its compatriot.

At last, Merric dropped it, withdrawing his hand from the thing’s chest.

He turned to look at me, then at the necromancer behind me. “You should’ve used something sturdier,” he said, in a voice as cold as ice. “You should’ve-“ he broke off.

The thing behind him *twitched*.

He turned too slowly to catch it before it lunged, tackling him and sinking its claws into his chest.

“You should’ve remembered that it’s not just my magic fueling these,” the necromancer taunted, wagging a finger at Merric as he fought to get free.

I was there as quickly as my paws would take me, hooking my claws into the creature and sinking my fangs into its neck until they met bone.

The thing’s head spun all the way around, stitched eyelids very close to my own eyes as it opened its mouth and screamed.

Its longest arms found mine, talons sinking into my sides and forcing a cry of pain past my teeth.

Merric rolled away, surging to his feet and surging past me to once again catch the unattached creature, though we’d traded dance partners.

The wound in this one’s chest wept *black* blood, and I knocked it backward, pulling myself free and shuddering at the sharp, burning pain in my ribs.

As if it didn’t feel any pain at all, the creature wasted no time in meeting my fangs again, and again. Each time it left wounds of its own, until my sides were covered in my own blood that spattered the floor whenever I backed off.

The pain was constant now, and I’d ‘killed’ this thing at least three times.

Not that it seemed to know that.

“Why do you seem to *enjoy* this?” The necromancer paced along the nearest machine, dragging his hands over his head. “What about this is enjoyable, George?”

I was sure I’d never told this man my name.

“It’s like I have to tell you everything. When is a door not a door? When it’s *ajar*. Wasn’t that obvious?” His voice rose, his rant becoming more animated. “I’m a *secret*. Your fox guessed it, but you haven’t. You still haven’t. Oh, George, you’re killing me here. Don’t you see? While you play with my pets, you’re killing me. But I’m already dead. You’re just driving in the pin.”

I tried to focus on his words, for all the good it did me, as the creature sliced and slashed. He was beginning to drive me insane with his ramblings, like I’d missed something obvious and I was doing this to myself.

I was sure if I had the choice, I would not choose to be in this much pain.

Merric was starting to tire. I could see it in the way his movements were getting jerky and how his eyes looked stark against his ever pale face.

I hadn’t seen Yuna in minutes. She was somewhere, hopefully coming up with something better than this, and I hadn’t heard her creature in just as long.

My own abomination lunged, surprising me into taking a step back and right into a pool of my own slick blood.

Eyes wide, I scrambled not to do the unthinkable. I couldn’t *fall*. Not here. If I fell, that thing would be on me in an instant, and I’d be a headless hybrid.

I didn’t go down, but I couldn’t catch my balance, tired as I was.

The monster saw its chance and lunged.

Merric threw a ball of foxfire, opening himself up to the monster that was upon him and slashing, claws going deep into his chest.

I gave him all of my attention, a howl leaving my throat as something constricted around my heart.

Oh Goddess, please-

Whatever the end of that thought was, it was cut off when the necromancer's pet slammed into me. It knocked me to the ground, slicing at me with claws that dug deep marks wherever they found purchase.

I snapped my jaws at it, closing around bone and flesh and biting down in my own attempt at fighting back, until one of its too-long hands wrapped around my lower jaw and pressed.

Hard.

I'd never screamed in wolf form before. I did now, the pain and pressure indescribable as the bones of my lower jaw began to *crack* between this thing's fingers as easily as if I was a fucking peanut shell.

If it crushed my jaw, I was sure I would never heal.

I screamed again, losing the grip on my shift but not able to shake the thing's hand, its fingers now digging into the hinges of my human jaw. Tears streamed down my face, and clawless fingers found the monster's wrist and squeezed in an attempt for it to let me go.

Suddenly it released me. The monster was swept backward, crying out in surprise and releasing my face.

I fell forward onto my hands, arms shaking as I held myself up. Tears fell from my eyes just as blood dribbled from my lips, both of them darkening the concrete below.

Merric.

I couldn't get up. There was no way my legs would support me, but that didn't stop me from dragging myself over to where the kitsune lay facedown on the floor.

Unsure if I could move my mouth enough to speak, I rolled him over onto his back, terrified of what I might find.

His eyes opened, blood at his own lips.

"Oh, George," he sighed, reaching one hand up. "Come on, don't cry for a fox. Especially not this fox." He touched my face, but I winced at the pain of even the brush of his fingers.

Merric sat up, thankfully able to do it on his own as I wasn't sure what assistance I could really give. He looked past me, eyes flicking from one

place to the next.

“Either the troublesome trio are psychic, or Yuna is smarter than the both of us put together,” he remarked. “Too bad none of us thought to bring fire, huh? But now that Indra’s here–“

He broke off as I sagged against his shoulder, my vision blurring again.

“Hey, come on now, George. Don’t you *dare* pass out. You’re going to sit up and watch these fuckers burn, *do you understand*?” He pressed a hand to my shoulder, his words blurring together to my ears.

“Stay *awake*. Do you hear me? You need to stay *awake*.”

My last thought was an unspoken apology for not being able to stay awake before a surge of blackness overtook me.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22

The smell of laundry soap drifted into my nose, gently reminding me that I knew this scent and I knew who washed their things with it.

Gentle, like light lavender. I preferred it, too, because of my sensitive nose that streamed when my face was pressed to linens washed with strongly scented cleaner.

It was only a few weeks ago that Indra and I had discovered we used the same laundry detergent.

My eyes opened, hunting for the source of a soft *whooshing* sound somewhere over my head.

A fan. The noise came from a ceiling fan above me that spun lazily to circulate the heavy New Orleans air.

I'd seen this fan before, just as I'd smelled this soap before.

Unless I was very much mistaken, I was in the guest bedroom of the troublesome trio's residence.

My jaw ached, and when I lifted a trembling hand to touch it, the skin felt warm, like it wasn't truly healed.

The pain was a sure sign that it wasn't, but it was a far cry better than how I'd felt in the warehouse.

My heart pounded, speeding up of its own accord before my brain could race right along with it.

What had happened?

Was the man-the necromancer-dead?

Were Merric and Yuna all right?

There was a mirror in this room, I knew from experience, and I turned my head to the side to check it, just in case Merric was there, as he sometimes was.

It was empty, save for the shocking sight of *me*.

My jaw was bruised dark purple and red, the mottled colors extending from my neck to spread over my cheeks. If that wasn't shocking enough, one of my eyes was a deep purplish-red.

If the other had been the same, I'd look a little bit like Merric in that regard.

I touched my face again, noticing the bruising on my wrist when I did.

My body ached somewhat, but the pain was bearable. I moved my hands, flexing all ten of my fingers, and then moved my legs, knees coming up so my feet could rest flat on the bed.

While my extremities seemed fine and, most importantly, still attached, my ribs protested heavily to any move I made. Sitting up felt like I was getting punched in the gut, and I doubled over to wrap my arms around my body, eyes pressed tightly shut.

Where was my phone? I definitely wasn't getting up anytime soon, but I could at least text my friends to see where they were and if everyone was all right.

My phone was nowhere to be found. Hopefully, someone had retrieved my stuff and it wasn't still at that warehouse.

"Great," I breathed, unsure if I could do more than whisper. The movement of my mouth caused the pain in my jaw to flare up, and every *breath* hurt my ribs.

Merric's injured form flashed through my head, and I scooted to the edge of the bed, teeth set against the pain of movement.

I *had* to make sure he was okay.

Someone had been nice enough to give me a long-sleeved t-shirt that covered me to mid-thigh, and that was going to have to be good enough. While I figured it was Cian, as the vampire was closest to me in size, it had been washed recently enough that I couldn't scent anyone else on it.

Levering myself to my feet, I nearly fell. My head swam, and I curled my toes into the soft carpet under me to ground myself.

I swallowed back the saliva flooding my mouth, fighting the nausea that twisted around my insides as the pain in my body doubled.

Oh yeah. This had been an awful idea.

Placing one foot in front of the other, I fixed my eyes on the door across the room. It shouldn't have been a long trip, but the distance yawned in front of me like I was trying to cross an abyss.

After what felt like ages, I reached the other side of the softly lit room, falling against the door instead of walking through it. I could lie back down *later*. After I knew everyone was fine.

My fingers found the doorknob while I rested my head against the wood, eyes closed, and I twisted until I could push it open.

Success. Even if it was a small success, it was an achievement.

My eyes opened…and landed firmly on Cian.

The blonde vampire looked puzzled, standing in the hallway in a long sleeve shirt and jeans with his hands shoved into his pockets.

He also looked *fine*, and I couldn't help but be jealous.

"Did you know," the vampire began slowly. "That this house is full of supernatural creatures with *excellent* hearing? If you need something, you could've just said something." His tone was chastising, but I didn't have the argument to fight him for it.

Instead, my knees shook with the task of holding me upright.

Cian's gaze sharpened as my hand gripped the doorframe, fingers digging into the wood.

"Merric," I gasped through lips that hurt to open. "Are he and Yuna–" My legs gave out, and Cian surged forward, just fast enough to keep me from hitting the floor.

"I've got you," he murmured, drawing me close to him while minding my injuries. "Yuna is fine. She's the one who called us when she realized the three of you wouldn't be able to take care of it." He lifted me carefully, my hand gripping his shirt.

"I don't want to lie down," I told him, only lying a little bit. I wanted to see everyone. I wanted to make *sure* they were all right.

Cian hesitated. "You should really sleep," he said, voice low.

"Is Merric okay?" He hadn't answered that, and I needed him to be okay.

"He will be," the vampire promised. "I swear to you. He's in better shape than you, but he is sleeping. As you should be."

"Let me see him." It wasn't that I didn't believe him, exactly. But I worried that he was trying to soften the blow.

“I’m not lying to you.” He shifted his grip on me, but I didn’t have enough time to wonder why before he picked me up in his arms, cradling me with one arm around my shoulders and the other under my knees.

Hissing out a pained breath, my hand gripped his shirt tighter as I waited for the pain to ebb.

He waited, watching my face as the pain lessened again.

“Sorry. It was going to hurt however I picked you up,” the vampire said, stepping back into the room I’d just left.

“If you put me on that bed then I will get up and go find him, no matter if I have to *crawl*,” I promised, the words soft.

Cian blinked, one brow raising. “Is that so? There are a lot of restraints in this house–“

“*I need to know he’s okay*.” I wasn’t in the mood for jokes. Not now, when unshed tears burned my eyes, and I feared for the safety of my fox.

I refused to reflect on how right that felt. Calling him *my* fox. My kitsune. My *nogitsune.*

I doubted Merric felt the same about me, and I wouldn’t tell him that he’d risen through the ranks rather quickly in my emotions.

“If I show you he’s fine, will you sleep?” Cian asked after a moment’s consideration.

“Yes. I mean, I don’t know if I can sleep, but I’ll try to.” How could I sleep when my brain threatened to overwhelm me with all the mistakes that led to Merric being injured?

It was different when it was me. When my own mistakes led to injuries or harm, that was fine. I had no one else to blame. I’d get hurt for any of them, as well. That was also fine.

But I had fucked up, and now Merric was hurt.

That was unacceptable.

A tear slid down my face, burning a trail against my skin. I wiped it away, hating that I was crying in front of *Cian* when he already thought me less powerful and naive.

Admittedly, I was both of those things compared to him.

But it was still a sore point for me.

Cian opened another door, this one leading into their small office. I’d never really been in here before. I never came over to do much *office work*, but the room had been cleared out, the desk bare, and against the far wall was a large, plush sofa under a small window.

Merric lay there, blanket tucked up to his chin and eyes closed.

I could see him breathing. The blanket rose and fell with every slow, sleeping breath that the kitsune took.

There was no facade now. His white ears were nestled in his hair, and the shadows under his eyes had never looked more prominent.

As I watched, he shifted slightly, mouth curling into a small frown.

Cian closed the door, cutting off my sight of the fox.

“Is he all right? Is Yuna okay?” I murmured through aching jaws. My heart pounded, and there was no way I was going back to sleep.

I wouldn’t tell Cian that.

“Yuna is fine, and Merric is all right,” Cian repeated. “He wasn’t hurt as badly as you, and he was already starting to heal when we brought him back. Unlike a certain hybrid.” He fixed me with his scarlet eyes. “I thought you healed faster than this.”

Once back in the guest room, he sat me on the edge of the bed and straightened.

“It is,” I agreed, gently running my fingers over my bruised jaws. “But if I get hurt *really badly* over and over again, it slows down.”

“What exactly does ‘really badly’ mean?”

I ducked my head. “I got thrown off the catwalks in that building. And Merric and I were fighting off those things for a while.” My tired brain reminded me of my other problems. “Did you guys kill them? And *him*? The necromancer?”

Cian hesitated. “I don’t suppose I could convince you to sleep first?”

I did not *need to sleep*. I was up, and I wanted to *be* up so I could figure out what in the world I was doing.

Or reflect on where I’d fucked up.

“Where’s my phone?” I said, ignoring his question. “I need to text Aveline.” And do about sixty other things. Could I text Yuna? Ask her what happened while making Cian think I was sleeping? I gazed up at him through wide eyes, playing up the helpless look he liked to pin on me.

“Your phone is on the charger,” Cian replied with a smile.

“Oh?” I looked for it on the nightstand, wondering if I’d missed it before.

“With Indra.”

“Oh.”

“Downstairs.”

“*Oh*.” So much for that. “Summarize what happened for me, and I’ll go to sleep?”

More likely, I’d close my eyes and whisper for the Loa until I ran out of breath or one of them showed up.

Cian shot me a disbelieving look and walked around to the other side of the bed, sinking down onto it.

“*Down*,” he reminded me, pointing to the bed beside himself.

“Certainly can’t sleep with you in here *existing*,” I mumbled, but I struggled back under the soft blankets anyway, the sheet cool on my hip where my borrowed shirt rode up.

Cian waited until I was comfortable, then did the unexpected.

The vampire curled around me, arm over my hips to hold me gently.

Invisible fingers squeezed my heart tightly and I couldn’t help but feel comforted by his presence behind me and his arm over my waist. I swallowed around a lump in my throat.

“Akiva was the one who pulled the necromancer’s pet off of you,” Cian began in his quiet voice. "He brought it to us for Indra to burn.”

That sounded easy. It sounded *simple*.

What had we done wrong?

“But we had an advantage you didn’t,” the man went on as if reading my mind. “Fire is always your best bet against the dead, and Indra is a never-ending supply of hellfire. Akiva is a lich, which is very similar to a necromancer, all things considered. Fighting the dead is second nature to him, and he takes them apart much more easily than the rest of us.”

I felt his lips press comfortingly against my hair before he leaned back and spoke again.

“It’s not a question of talent. Not at all. It was a question of attributes. The three of you are powerful, you know that.”

I snorted. “Is this really you, Cian? Am I dreaming? You’re the last person to tell me that *I’m* powerful.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” he denied. “But I am the first person to tell you when you’re outmatched by no fault of your own.”

“Thanks,” I sighed. I stared at the wall, still very aware of where he was pressed against me. It wasn’t sexual. Not with the way I felt.

But it was comforting. More than comforting. I *wanted* him to stay. I wanted him to hold me and to talk to me.

“You’re supposed to be sleeping,” he reminded me. “The more you sleep, the faster you heal. I doubt that’s any different just because you’re a hybrid.”

He was right, of course. I healed just the same as they did, and sleep would boost that back to normal.

But I didn’t *want* to sleep.

“We killed his pets, but not him,” Cian admitted after a few seconds of silence. “And I don’t think you should go after him again…is what I would like to say.” He let out a long breath. “But I won’t. Though, I will ask that you take someone with you like Akiva or Indra. You need fire, or you need someone with an affinity for death.”

“What about Merric?” I fought the urge to reach up and grip his fingers. “He has foxfire.”

“It’s not *really* fire,” Cian explained. “It doesn’t have the same effect on them as regular fire does. Hellfire is even better, but that’s exclusive to hellhounds.”

Maybe I *should* start letting those triplets come with me.

Without thinking, I rolled over, blinking up at Cian in slight surprise when I realized what I’d done.

“You okay?” He reached up to run his finger over my bruised cheek, his touch light. “Does this hurt?”

“It doesn’t hurt,” I promised, heart thumping hard in my chest.

It was easy to remember all the things that drew me to him. He held an authority that the rest of my lovers didn’t. Even if he wasn’t as old as Merric, he felt powerful. He felt like he knew what he was doing and what *needed* to be done.

That, along with his easy going personality, drew me to him like a moth to a flame.

“Sweetheart, you’re thinking too much,” he told me, still wearing that easy smile. “Can’t you let it go? Just for today?”

“But it’s my fault,” I said in a whisper. “I messed up, and I got Merric hurt.” Later, I would imagine all the ways that I would make the necromancer suffer for what he’d done. Later, I would tell the others that I had a plan and that the man who hurt Merric would *suffer*.

But for now, I could be like this. Grateful that he was okay, but with the dreadful feeling of *what if* as I considered all the different scenarios where this didn’t work out the way it had.

Cian pulled me to him, his arm lifting to rest against my face and cover my own arm. He was very careful, and his touch didn't hurt at all.

"It's not your fault." The vampire spoke firmly, his eyes locked on mine. "This is *not* your fault. Would I lie to you, if I thought you had done something wrong?"

When I didn't answer, a small smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I wouldn't," he assured me. "I didn't in the bayou. I told you what I thought. And I'm not lying now. You deserve none of the blame for this, and you have got to *sleep*."

When I glanced down, he leaned forward again, lips brushing my forehead.

"Sleep," he repeated. "So that when you wake up, you and I can plan on how we'll make him suffer for what he did to all of you."

His words comforted me. Undid a knot inside of me that I hadn't realized held me tight. My shoulders sagged, and I tilted my chin upward very slightly, lips parted in a question.

Cian answered immediately, pressing his lips to mine in a light, chaste kiss and pulled me more firmly against him.

He was right, I thought as I felt the beginnings of exhaustion slipping through my bones. Sleepiness followed, and I closed my eyes as he pulled away to watch my face.

All I needed was a little bit of rest.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 23

My fingers curled into the pillow as I awoke, and I didn't need to open my eyes to know that Cian was gone.

Of course he was. I couldn't expect him to hang around all day, could I?

When I did open my eyes, I was greeted with the sight of white fur and glittering yellow eyes in the mirror.

Merric in his fox form sat on the pillow behind me, his tails waving behind him like an irritated cat.

Or, he did in the mirror, anyway. I knew for a fact that if I turned over, there would be nothing on the bed behind me.

"I'm glad you're okay," I murmured to his reflection, my eyes finding his.

The waving of his tails halted. He stared at me, eyes narrowing like I'd said something strange.

"You don't have to believe it," I shrugged, happy that only a small ache remained in my jaw. "But I was really worried about you. And…" I looked away from him, at the white sheets under my hand as my fingers curled into them.

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you *sorry*?" A hand gripped my shoulder and turned me onto my back, eliciting a gasp from me.

"You're not just in the mirror?" I looked up into Merric's face with wide eyes. The kitsune rested above me, braced on his arms, and stared down into my face with puzzled irritation.

"Of course I'm not," he dismissed. "Why are you sorry?"

I itched to reach up and touch him. Just to make sure he was real.

But I didn't.

"Because it's my fault you were hurt," I said flatly, my insides clenching uncomfortably at the admission. "I didn't mean to. I shouldn't have asked you to come. You could've *died*."

He stared at me for a long moment. Then another. As if he didn't know what to say.

"Wow," he finally announced, leaning away from me slightly.

I bit my lip. Had I said something wrong? His reaction didn't make me feel any better about *anything*.

"I don't know if I'm insulted or *really* insulted." Leaning down again, Merric reached out to wrap his fingers very loosely around the base of my throat.

A warning, almost. To stay where I was, just under his hand.

"I was nowhere near dying," the kitsune promised, leaning close to me again. "*You* were. In case you don't remember. I just needed to rest."

I wasn't sure if he was telling the truth, but I wasn't sure how to push him into telling me if he didn't want to.

"I don't want you to get hurt," I admitted.

"You don't want anyone getting hurt," Merric amended, rubbing his thumb over the hollow of my throat. "But that's the thing, George. You can't go through life on this path like that. Someone *always* gets hurt."

He leaned closer to me until his face was barely inches from mine.

I wondered if he would kiss me again.

Unthinkingly I lifted my hand, extracting it from the blankets and reaching out for him.

The kitsune leaned back, staring at my hand like it was a snake that could bite him. "Can I touch you?" I asked, halting my movement.

He didn't answer. His eyes narrowed very slightly, and then he turned and pressed his face against my palm.

I took his lead, slowly sliding my hand up from his jaw to his cheek until I could curl my fingers into his thick, tousled hair.

It was surprisingly soft.

"Do you know how you stop someone you care for from getting hurt?" Merric asked, eyes never leaving mine as I ran my fingers through his hair.

"Make a better plan?" I asked bitterly. "Know what I'm going up against?"

He blinked. “No. You’re thinking about it too hard.” He leaned down until our faces were only inches apart.

“You hurt them first. You cripple them. Kill them if you have to, so they can’t take away what you care about.” His gaze was direct and very intense. It made me slightly uncomfortable, along with the way his voice had dropped to something very dangerous.

“I don’t hurt people who haven’t given me a reason,” I replied just as quietly.

He tilted his head to the side. “What if the *reason* is that they’ve already taken away the thing you care about? What good is all your power then, when it’s too late?”

Because I wasn’t a monster like him. Like Yuna. Like everyone in this house.

I knew what they were, and I didn’t condemn them for it. I knew that any of them would kill at the barest hint of danger to themselves or those they cared for.

I knew, and I didn’t care.

But that wasn’t *me*.

“I feel terrible,” I admitted. “You shouldn’t have been injured for me.” Saying this was difficult. I didn’t want to push him away, but I didn’t want him to stay out of some obligation that I could only guess at. “You don’t have to help me,” I said at last.

Was that shock in his eyes, when he recoiled like he’d been slapped?

“You don’t *want* my help,” the kitsune accused. He turned towards the door, lips twisting into a sneer. “Of course not. Why would you, since *Cian* and his lovers saved your life again. I get it–“

“You don’t,” I interrupted, grabbing his arm before he could go any further. I shrugged free of the blankets, very aware that I *still* only wore the t-shirt I’d been given.

Judging by the way Merric’s gaze traveled down my body and to my exposed thighs, he noticed too.

“They can’t replace you. They’re nothing like you.” I kept hold of his hand, trying to draw him back to me. “I don’t want you to think you’re obligated to help me, that’s all.” My words sped up in time with the beating of my nervous heart. I was rambling, I knew, but I had to explain.

“I worry that you think that you owe me or that you have to help me. Otherwise I won’t give you those favors I owe. But that’s not true. You

don’t *have* to do anything, but I appreciate anything you–“

I wasn’t expecting him to crush his lips to mine, effectively cutting me off.

And I could have never dreamed that he’d push me back onto the bed and crawl over me, until his legs bracketed my hips, and he could tangle his fingers in my hair to force my chin back so my neck was arched to him.

“Oh, George,” he tsked, like I’d done something stupid and he was here to correct me. “George, I think you have a problem here.”

“What’s that?” I breathed, close enough to him that our lips brushed when we spoke.

“You’re getting attached.” A small smile curved over his mouth. “What a foolish thing to do–“

“If I’m foolish, then so are you,” I accused rather boldly, unsure if I was even correct in my thinking. He was *offended* that I hadn’t wanted him here. And now that I had let it be known that it was because I cared and not because I didn’t want him, he was kissing me and pressing me into the bed.

If he wasn’t getting attached as well, then I really needed my head checked.

“I…” He jerked back, like I’d slapped him, and seemed lost for words for the first time. “You don’t want that,” he argued, but the words held very little conviction.

“You may be able to get into my dreams and into my mirror, but you can’t see into my thoughts,” I promised. “You don’t know what I want.”

His fingers stroked my still-bruised jaw that was beginning to ache with all the talking-and kissing-we’d done.

“I’m cashing in one of your debts,” Merric announced suddenly, and my heart skipped a beat or seven in my chest.

This couldn’t be good.

Before I could panic, though, he went on brusquely. “You don’t get to tell me not to help or to leave like you just did again. *I* decide where to go, George. And if I want to help you, then I will help you. Without any input on your end.”

I almost smiled. Was that even *really* a debt? “Okay,” I agreed. “I can do that.”

“You *will* do that,” Merric corrected. He leaned down again, eyes searching mine and his breath hot on my lips. “George–“

The door creaked open very loudly and very pointedly.

Merric jerked upward, his tails bristling behind him. I looked past him, expecting Cian.

It was Akiva.

The lich leaned in the doorway, hands over his chest. “I’m *so* sorry,” Akiva drawled in his deeply accented voice. “Truly, I had thought to give you another few minutes, but then it got boring. If you’re well enough, George, would you join us downstairs?” His eyes leveled on Merric. “*You* were supposed to already be there.”

Merric didn’t look at all ashamed. He grinned wickedly at Akiva, his hand still at my jaw. “You interrupted because you were jealous,” he accused. “Not because you got tired of putting your ear to the door.”

“Oh yes, I am just so jealous,” the lich agreed. “Of your half-assed debt collecting and your adorable promises. You need practice.”

The kitsune’s face fell to something like surprise and bafflement.

“Enough,” I sighed, getting to my feet. “Do you have any clothes for me? I’m getting a little tired of being half-naked.”

“Why?” Akiva blinked. “None of us will complain. Including your fox.”

I expected Merric to jump on his words. Correct him in saying that he wasn’t *mine* at all.

But the nogitsune just eyed Akiva with something like irritation and got to his feet.

“Clothes?” I prompted when the two of them just *looked* at each other.

“Here.” Akiva lifted my running shorts from the dresser. “We washed everything for you. Get dressed, if you must, and come to the living room.” He looked at Merric and opened his mouth to say something else but didn’t get the chance.

The kitsune snorted and evaporated into thin air.

It took me a few minutes to change, and I rubbed my jaw when I was finally done. My legs ached, as did my whole body, and a very large part of me wanted to sink back down on the bed.

Instead, I dragged myself down the stairs, happy that no one was around to see that it took me almost double the time as usual.

At least I was *mostly* healed. Though, I wondered how my ribs would fare if I did something stupid like taking a deep breath.

I resolved to hunt down some aspirin in this Goddess forsaken house. Did hellhounds, liches, or vampires ever actually have the need for pain medicine? The thought almost made me laugh.

The others were not in the living room, where I'd half expected to find them, but it was easy enough to follow their scent and the sound of their voices into the kitchen.

The wooden floored kitchen was as pristine as always. If there'd been any kind of mess when the trio brought us back, the white marble countertops and shiny white cabinets had been wiped clean now.

An island stretched along the length of the long room, and while normally it was only used to toss food on or toss the mail at. For the first time ever that I'd seen, it was being used as its intended purpose.

Three stools had been dragged out of somewhere. One held Indra, another Merric. His shoulders were hunched very slightly, the dark circles under his eyes still looking a touch too deep for my liking.

Was he really as well-healed as he'd said he was?

The kitsune barely glanced up at my approach. The third stool was empty, and I gratefully slid onto it, my arms resting on the cool, shiny top of the island.

Akiva leaned on the island across from me, his eyes fixed on my face as I tried to get comfortable.

"My face isn't going to heal any faster just because you're glaring at it," I informed him, raising my eyes to his. He snorted but didn't look away.

Cian and Yuna leaned against the counters on the walls, both of them wearing unhappy frowns of the same intent. I snuck a look at the cecaelia, happy to see that she looked much better than Merric and I did.

When no one started, I let out a long breath and spoke. "Cian tells me that the necromancer got away."

"He distracted us," Akiva corrected. "He let us take his pets, and he left in the chaos."

"There was too much blood for me to track him," Indra added. "My nose isn't as good as yours, George, but I doubt you would've been able to either."

I didn't tell him that I had tracked the killer by the scent of the magics he carried, not what he actually smelled like. I doubted any of them could track magic by scent the way I could, and I wasn't sure how they'd react to that fact.

"Those pets of his were too strong to be fueled by just one necromancer," Merric said in a grim voice.

“They *weren’t* fueled by just his magic,” I pointed out. “He even said so. And–“

I’m a secret.

That’s what he’d said. That was the answer to one of his riddles. He hadn’t seemed satisfied when Merric had guessed it, though. He’d seemed disappointed that I hadn’t found some deeper meaning in it.

“And?” Akiva prompted.

“I don’t know,” I folded and unfolded my hands on the countertop. “Just the way he spoke…” I shook my head. Had he been just crazy, or had there been something more there?

“If you have me, you want to share me.” Merric quoted, his words precise. “If you share me, then you haven’t got me. What am I?”

“You’re a secret,” Cian answered.

I’m a secret. The words felt like there was something more to them. There had to be something I was missing.

“When is a door not a door?” I asked, remembering the other riddle he’d asked.

“When it’s ajar,” Merric said, answering before the others could. “That’s a child’s riddle.”

“I hate to be the one to point this out, but why do we think he was anything more than crazy?” Yuna drawled. “I only came face to face with him once, but it seemed like not all the lights were on upstairs.” She shifted, pressing her hip into the counter.

“Did he say anything to you? After I passed out?” I looked around the group.

“I did not hear him say anything before I lost track of him,” Akiva denied.

“He stayed far away from us while we took care of his mounters,” Yuna agreed.

My eyes landed on Merric. He didn’t speak. Didn’t offer an opinion of his own and very carefully looked at his hands.

Something felt off about his reaction.

And apparently, I wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“Do you know something we don’t, Merric?” Cian asked, his tone neutral. He didn’t sound accusatory. Not even suspicious. If I hadn’t been looking at the kitsune as well, I would have thought he just wanted more input.

“I think…” There was that look again. He was unsure. Wavering, like he couldn’t make up his mind.

My fingers clenched, and my heart rose in my chest, sudden anxiety blooming inside me.

“I think you should just chalk it up to him being crazy,” Merric said finally. “And not worry any more than that.”

“Something happened. You saw something.” I *was* accusing him, unlike the vampire behind me.

“I don’t think it’s worth mentioning.” He said quietly. “It would distract us from focusing on the important things.”

“How do you know it’s not important?” Yuna pressed.

“Four hundred years of experience,” he mumbled, almost too quietly for me to hear.

“You’re *four hundred?”* I yelped, unable to help my surprise.

He glared at me. “I told you at the gala I was older than Cian,” he reminded me.

“You also said Cian was only like, three hundred. I thought you were just a little older than that.”

“Cian doesn’t know how in the world you even know that,” The vampire commented airily, referring to himself in third person. “And my three hundredth birthday is a couple of years off, if you must know.”

I still couldn’t wrap my head around Merric being *four hundred* years old.

“*Anyway*,” Yuna began pointedly. “I think, for the time being, you should stop trying to find this necromancer, George.”

I whipped around to look at her, protests ready on my lips. The too-fast motion made my still injured body ache, but I set my teeth against the pain.

I didn’t want them to see just how much time it was taking me to bounce back.

“Alone,” she added. “Unfortunately, as I’m sure you know by now, Merric and I aren’t the greatest companions for this.”

Akiva leaned across the table, wagging his eyebrows dramatically in invitation.

I stared at him. “What if the two of you aren’t available?” I asked, addressing the lich and Indra. “Last I heard, the three of you were neck deep in vampire business.”

They traded a look with Cian.

“Is it too much to ask that if we can’t, you’ll wait for when we can?” Indra murmured. “We’ll do our best to make sure we’re available, but you’re not wrong. We can’t abandon Cian.”

“No, but there is another option,” the vampire at my back said.

Akiva looked down as if he was trying to hide the sudden scowl that was plain on his face.

“Niall’s companions would be able to help. And they aren’t in the middle of…problems, like I am,” Cian pointed out.

I could feel my own lips curling into something like distaste.

I didn’t trust the triplets. Not even Tisiphone, though I liked her just a bit more than the other two after she’d been relatively helpful at the crime scene.

Nor did I want anything to do with their Bokor, Uriel.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I demurred, eyeing the way Indra nodded in agreement with Cian. “We’ll figure it out. I won’t go looking for trouble without you.”

Akiva was still silent and didn’t look as if he agreed.

Was there dissension in the ranks? Was Akiva unhappy about something to do with Cian’s friends?

“At least you know what’s killing your voodoo priests now,” Yuna shrugged. “That was the challenge. Dealing with him might not be *easier*, but at least you can stop chasing your tail around the city.”

Something felt wrong about her words. Something rang…untrue.

There was something I was missing, and I had a feeling that I had most of the pieces already.

I just didn’t know how to put them together.

“You’re right,” I agreed, leaning more heavily on the counter. “Now we just have to trap him and hand him over to the Loa.”

“Why not kill him?” Indra inquired. “One of us will do it, if you’d rather.”

Merric spoke before I could. “Because none of us can make him suffer as the Loa can. I promise you, handing him over to them is not mercy. Killing him ourselves would be the easy way out.” He met my eyes, and something invisible seemed to curl between us. “So let’s make sure he goes to them still very much *alive*.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 24

I was getting accustomed to Merric catching me in the shadows and telling me things he didn't like to say in front of the others. It was his nature, I knew, and something I'd come to expect.

This time, I didn't give him the chance. I followed him back upstairs when he went to grab his phone, saying that I'd forgotten something as well.

When we got to the office he'd slept in, I followed him in and shut the door behind me pointedly.

The kitsune sighed and sat down on the sofa, leaning back until he could look up at me.

"You're welcome," he said sweetly. "Though, you could've come up with something better than that rushed '*I forgot something too*.' We'll come up with better excuses for you."

A shiver of surprise trailed up my spine. "You knew I was going to follow you up here?"

"I gave you the opening to follow me somewhere in the first place." His grin widened. "We'd have to spend a lot more time together for you to start outmaneuvering *me*. A few centuries worth."

The statement struck me oddly. Kitsune were as immortal as one could be if they reached the state of having nine tails. I was only twenty-four, with four more centuries to my name if I didn't die of shock or necromancer.

I really could spend that much more time with him.

If he allowed it. I shook my head, silently chastising myself to stop taking his joking comments so seriously.

“I can’t wait to see the look on your face when I *do* outsmart you,” I warned. “Because it’ll happen.”

“Sure,” Merric agreed. “If something cuts off my tails, blinds me, and strikes me dumb, I have no doubt you’ll be able to outsmart me.”

Sometimes, the hoops he went through to insult me were just astounding.

“This is the part where you demand for me to tell you what happened after you passed out,” the kitsune prompted.

“Do I have to demand?” I wandered over to sit beside him on the couch, sinking onto the leather.

“I suppose you don’t *have* to,” he shrugged. “But it would add some flavor. Some intensity to the conversation.”

“Merric.” My voice was flat. “I almost died. I had to deal with *the Riddler* with his creepy pets and you getting impaled. I can say to you, without hesitation, that I don’t need any more flavor or intensity today.”

“It’s probably not that important,” Merric warned.

“Liar. If you thought that, you would’ve told the others.” I met his eyes boldly.

“I could *make* you stop asking,” the kitsune pointed out.

“That’d be a waste of a perfectly good life debt, wouldn’t it?”

He blinked, his yellow eyes dark and full of something I couldn’t identify. “Clearly, you’re right, George,” he said in a brittle voice. “I should do something better with it like make you walk to the bottom of the lake.”

His words didn’t frighten me. I just shrugged and waited for him to continue.

“The others weren’t near us.” His voice had grown quiet, and he leaned forward until his mouth was close to my ear. “They took his pets and went to burn them. It took all four of them to do it.” He reached up to brush his fingers along my throat, pulling a shiver from me.

“The necromancer looked at you after you’d passed out, and he was… *worried* almost. He knelt a few feet from where you lay.” His lips brushed my ear.

“He spoke strangely, George. I *like* riddles, but even I didn’t understand what he meant.”

“What was it?” I whispered, trying to scan my mind for any riddle I might have heard in my life that could give me some assistance here.

“He told me to tell you that if you don’t pull out the pins, he’ll uncrown the mother-saint.”

I pulled away, eyebrows knit together in confusion. “Uncrown the mother-saint?”

Merric nodded slowly.

“Pull out the *pins*?” I didn’t know what that meant, either.

“I think it’s meant just for you,” the kitsune admitted. “I’ve been trying to puzzle it out for you all day–“ He met my eyes suddenly, searching my gaze as if he thought I might say something.

I wasn’t sure what he was looking for and didn’t speak.

Finally, Merric went on. “But I can’t figure it out. How do you uncrown a saint?”

“A *mother*-saint,” I corrected. “If he said it like that, then it has to have meaning.”

Would he kill this ‘saint’? And who in the Goddess’s name was he talking about?

“I think–“ Merric looked up, then got to his feet. He pulled me up as well, ignoring my whispered protest as he pushed me against the closest wall and crushed his lips to mine.

The door opened just as he growled and bit my lower lip, sending my heart to hammering.

I looked over as it swung open, seeing Akiva there. He looked rather unamused, and his mouth was pressed into a thin line.

“I figured I would join the party,” the lich said, striding inside and closing the door behind him as well. He crossed the room without stopping until he could sit on the sofa we’d just vacated, stretching out his long legs and crossing them at the ankle.

“We were kind of in the middle of something,” Merric told him sweetly, his tails visible and writhing at his back.

Akiva snorted and eyed us. “Maybe, but not that. This is ‘share secrets with George time,’ isn’t it?”

Merric and I traded a look. I spoke first. “Akiva, I’m not sure what you–“

“I don’t need to hear what he told you. For all I know, he was confessing his *burgeoning* feelings for you. Though I very much doubt it.” He blinked and looked at the ceiling.

When neither of us moved, he spoke again. “You can sit. I don’t mind.”

As if we had been waiting for his *permission.*

Merric huffed but sat, taking the seat furthest from the lich as he could.

I settled in the middle of the sofa, dragging my legs up under me and looking between them.

“Well?” The kitsune prompted. “Are you going to say something worth hearing?”

Akiva didn’t answer immediately. He tilted his head first one way, then the other. “I think you should…refrain from taking Niall and his comrades up on their offer,” he said finally.

“You don’t like them.” It wasn’t an accusation when it was so easy to see.

Akiva turned his head to eye me petulantly. “I’m sure I like everyone who Cian keeps in his inner circle.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“If you keep your voice down, perhaps.”

That made me roll my eyes, but I went on. “Who came first? You and Indra, or the triplets and the Bokor?”

“They don’t like to be called *the triplets*,” Akiva informed me conversationally. “Ever since they changed their names, they demand to be called the Furies. It’s quite pretentious of them. I came first. Cian met up with Niall a few years after we started traveling together, and Niall seemed…” he pondered his words. “Jealous. When we saw him next, he had Uriel with him.”

“And then Indra came along?” I prompted.

“Yes. And then the Furies. Just as *special* as Indra, but in their own way.”

“Indra is…special?”

Akiva’s look was not quite so friendly this time.

“Okay, that’s not what I meant. You love him. I *know* he’s special to you. But I meant–“

“Cian stole him, didn’t he?” Merric asked, leaning forward with a gleam in his eyes. “I always wondered how he did it. He *stole* Indra.”

“Indra was not a thing to be stolen,” Akiva said reproachfully. “He *chose* Cian.”

I stayed quiet, hoping someone would take pity on me and explain.

“Some hellhounds are attached to places or things,” Merric said, finally explaining. “Those that are born and not created. It makes them more

powerful than their independent counterparts, but it comes at a price."

"It's not my story to tell, nor is it yours to guess at, fox," Akiva warned.

Merric shrugged one shoulder. "I don't need to hear the smutty details, anyway."

"So the triplets-the *furies*-are special as well. But not like Indra?" I confirmed.

"Not like Indra," the lich assured me. "And now Niall sees that Cian has a summoner. Only, he can't go to the store and pick one up, can he? He searched long and hard for his Bokor and his *Furies*." Akiva met my eyes.

"You think he'd do something to me?"

Now he looked away. "I think he is one of Cian's oldest and dearest friends," he intoned. "But I also think that I do not quite trust him. I don't like how the triplets treat Indra. Nor do I like the smell of Uriel's magic." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "But I did not come here to gossip about my love's friends."

"You kinda did," disagreed Merric. "You *literally* did, in fact."

Akiva stood, eyes narrowing at Merric. "Be careful around them. That is all I ask, yes, S*ahirataa*?" There it was. The Arabic pet name I couldn't understand but loved all the same.

"Can you write that down so Indra can translate it for me?" I asked lightly, trying to soothe the frown and the way he radiated discontent.

"My witch," he answered. "That is what it means." Without another word, he opened the door and left, not bothering to close it behind him.

"Well, *that* was unexpected," Merric announced, getting to his feet as well. "Man, you just have *so* much to think about, don't you?" He grinned and walked past me, shocking me with the sight of his two-tailed facade.

"Yeah," I agreed, when both of them were gone. It was definitely a *lot* to think about.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 25

"What is your magic, exactly?" I shoved my hands in the pockets of my lightweight hoodie, eyeing Akiva from under the broad hood.

My sole companion was dressed similarly to me. We both wore all black, which was commonplace for me. I wasn't sure for him. Wasn't there some kind of stereotype about the death-magic-bearer dressing like a goth kid in his skinny jeans and slim fit hoodie?

Well. To be fair. That same stereotype could be applied to me on any given day.

"*Sahirataa*, have you fallen and hit your head?" The lich asked kindly, sliding closer to me as we walked the sidewalk. He'd taken to calling me that, and I wondered how long it would last. I wondered how long *we* would last, and hoped the answer was 'a very long time.' "I am a lich."

As per usual, I wasn't sure where we were going. Only that I liked to start at one of the murderer's crime scenes and work outward.

"No. I haven't. I know you're a lich. I know you play with dead things. I know you keep your soul in a jar, and I know you have a bird and a sword."

"A phylactery. I do not keep it in a *jar*." His tone was tinged with distaste. A phylactery could be many things. I was simply being obtuse for the fun of it.

"What do you keep it in, then?" In my continuous, deathly nightmare, courtesy of Collette, my mind had never been able to settle on a form for the container that kept his soul. "In my dream, it always shifted. You know,

the one the witches put me in." I'd told them about that well enough that he'd know what I was speaking of.

Akiva glanced up at the overcast sky as if he could peer straight through the clouds. Raindrops landed on his skin as I watched, announcing the continuation of the drizzle we'd dealt with all evening.

"You do know how I hate to tell you that you're wrong and your information is outdated…" Akiva began with a look in my direction. When I didn't correct his *obvious* lie, he went on. "I have not known a lich to keep their soul in a jar or a bottle or a sprite can in many years. We are not so stupid to pick something that gives us an obvious weakness."

"Where do you hide it? Under your pillow, so only the tooth fairy knows where it is?" I teased gently.

"I am much more apt to answer your questions on my magic than your jabs at my *soul."*

"What exactly *is* your magic? Past the bird, which I don't think is a lich thing. I've met others with familiars. And the sword. Yuna does that too, though yours is a bit fancier." Not that I'd tell her that.

"Don't you remember that night at the bayou? I ripped a vampire's soul right out of his body."

"Like a vacuum," I agreed, recalling the event in question.

He eyed me reproachfully. "I am *not* a vacuum."

"Right…" I turned a corner, ducking around a group of tourists that didn't notice my existence. They were too busy with their phones, taking pictures of some nearby magic show, to even realize they'd almost ran into me.

"I can animate the dead," Akiva admitted. "Though I can't sew them together like a necromancer. That is the main difference, I would say, between my kind and his. My powers are over the soul, more than the body. Necromancers swing around dead bodies like puppets on strings. Wait one second." He wandered over to a food truck and came back promptly with freshly made donuts.

He offered one to me, pulling a smile from me. "You're so sweet," I teased, linking my arm with his. "Thank you."

"Yes," he agreed. "Don't tell Indra, though. He might feel that I am encroaching on his territory. Haven't you heard? He's the *nice* one."

"You're nice too," I disagreed, taking a bite of the warm pastry in my fingers. I was glad that both of the pastries had napkins wrapped around

them so that I could save myself the embarrassment of licking my fingers clean.

“Perhaps a little. If I agree, will you read my fortune for me again?”

The request took me by surprise. He was so rarely interested in my fortune telling, after all. I had to wonder why he wanted me to do it again.

“You don’t have to agree or anything for that. You merely have to *ask*,” I replied. “And I’ll give you the friends-only discount. It’ll be fourteen ninety-five.”

“What about the lovers discount? I think I deserve something a little better than that for how much you like my mouth on you while I hold you down.”

The woman passing us looked over in horror and hurried past.

Akiva looked back at her, a mischievous grin on his face.

“You did that on purpose.”

“So I did. Did I earn a better discount?”

I inhaled, trying to find anything in the air that didn’t belong. We were here for a reason, after all. But I still couldn’t help myself. “Your new price is sixty-three ninety-five.”

We walked in companionable silence for a few minutes. I scented the air often, my ears and tail on full display so that I could take advantage of partially-shifted senses.

“Why do you think a necromancer cares about the magic of voodoo?” Akiva inquired, tossing his napkins into a nearby trash can.

“I don’t know,” I replied, nose in the air. I glanced around at the crowds that were thicker than usual. This hadn’t been a great idea. Not *here*, where all the tourists stank up the street.

It was hard to smell anything other than bodies in need of a shower and food.

“But think about it. A necromancer is a type of witch. I don’t know that much about voodoo magic, but I would think it would take a lot of work to make it compatible with his brand of chaos.”

I was barely listening to him talk. Something made my nose itch, but I couldn’t place just what exactly had me wanting to sneeze.

“So *why* use their magic when he could just as easily kill witches and use theirs? Don’t you think it would be a lot fewer steps?” He waited politely for me to take notice and for the words to actually sink in.

He was right.

When I looked at Akiva, he had one brow raised, waiting for my answer.

"Why indeed?" I murmured. "I feel like this whole thing has to do with riddles. And I don't exactly come from a background of riddles." When I looked at him again, he shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Well, don't look at me," the lich shrugged. "I have known a sphinx rather intimately, but I never did share her kink for killing those who could not answer her riddles."

"Wait–what? You slept with a *sphinx*?"

Akiva nodded happily. "Oh yes. It was before Cian, of course. Back then, my family would call on the sphinxes should we need guidance. Her name was Teleia. She had a very pretty tail. Sharp claws–"

"Stop," I requested. "I don't know what direction this is about to go down, whether it be questionable or homicidal, but I'm sure I don't need to know." I tugged him back into movement as he chuckled.

"You really don't know any riddles?"

"Hmmm." Akiva made a show of thinking about it. "I cannot talk, but I reply when spoken to. What am I?"

"What?" I looked at him, gesturing him down a less populated street. The air here had a strange, sharp quality to it that I couldn't quite place.

I looked at him in askance as we walked, but he just watched me, expecting an answer.

He stopped walking, hands shoved in his pockets and an easy grin on his face.

I trailed to a stop as well, thinking. "You're…." I really was quite bad at riddles.

Looking down, I frowned at my shoes. "Can you say it one more time for me?"

Cramming my eyes shut, I listened to him clearly enunciate his words. "I cannot talk, but I reply when spoken to. *What* am I?"

"An echo."

My blood ran cold.

It wasn't *Akiva's* voice that answered.

Jerking my head up, I found that my shriek of warning was going to be too late. A new monster had wrapped long arms around Akiva and *jerked* him back into a dark alley.

It couldn’t have been natural; with my wolfish eyes, I should’ve been able to see him easily in the shadows.

But I couldn’t.

“Akiva!” I yelled, lunging forward with my heart in my throat.

Before I got to the darkness, a monster like the ones at the warehouse swelled out of the impenetrable shadows, pushing me back a couple of steps.

I looked around, ready to tell anyone near us to *run*, but there was no one there. Akiva and I were the only ones on the street, though I was sure there had been more people before.

I prepared myself, drawing up my magic to my hands and wondering if I could control The Moon long enough for it to do some good or if I should do something else entirely.

But the thing didn’t move.

It sank to its belly on the ground, staring up at me through sewn-shut lids.

It didn’t attack. It didn’t even growl.

“It’s not a very *good* riddle, as they go.” The shadows parted around the necromancer from before, dressed in the very same clothes and sporting smears of dried blood all along his shirt.

He looked even worse in the light than he had in the dark. The man gazed at me thoughtfully. “Oh! Here’s a better one. The more of this there is, the less you see. What is it?”

“Let Akiva go!” I snapped, fangs lengthening to sharp points as my anger flared.

“Hmm?” The necromancer looked over his shoulder. “Oh, your lich friend? I doubt it’ll take him long at all to get away from Molly.”

Something shrieked out a high, unpleasant giggle that made my ears ring.

“Did you miss my riddle? Perhaps you weren’t *listening*.” He rolled his eyes. “The more of this there *is*, the less you *see*. What is it?”

I had no idea. I had no fucking idea what the answer to his stupid riddle was. I threw my hands up in surrender and aggravation.

“I don’t know!” When I started to step around him, the thing on the ground rose up on its arms in a very blatant threat.

The necromancer sighed in utter disappointment. “It’s *darkness*,” he said gently, though still chastising. “Honestly, George, you’re not doing

well at this. I've given you all the answers. Your fox even got one for you! But you still refuse to see. Even now." He spread his arms wide. "When there's nothing between us."

"I don't need to understand," I breathed quietly, half-focusing on the sounds of Akiva's struggle to make sure he was still *struggling*. "You're a killer. You're a monster, and that's all I need to know."

He looked at the creature beside him. It slowly raised its head, its four arms dragging on the pavement.

Just looking at its dead, bLoated flesh in the daylight made me want to puke.

"Then we'll kill again." His voice was again not his own. My eyes snapped back to him, and I found that his eyes were completely white, with no sign of the pupil in them at all.

"We thought you might *be* something," the echoing voice went on. "All of those words. Everyone's attention on you…" He shook his head from side to side very slowly. "And Georgette Levasseur is just a blind, helpless child."

"I am not a child! And I am not helpless!" His head dropped forward as if a string had been cut. When he looked up again, his eyes were back to normal. "You are a *monster*, and I will stop you," I promised. "Now, let my friend *go*."

The necromancer stared at me for too many precious seconds. He looked first to his left, then bit his lip and grinned suddenly. "Take him," he invited, and stepped back into the shadows.

I wasted no time in following him, witch light glowing in my hand as I stepped into the alley that lay in a heavy black fog.

"Akiva!" I called. He couldn't be far. Only a few steps from me.

Something moved beside me, surging past my elbow with a low growl. I whirled, catching the tail end of it in my hand.

Whatever it was grabbed back, claws sinking into my hand and causing me to cry out.

I refused to let go. I let more of my shift slip through, my fingers curling into claw-tipped digits that sank into the thing's limb.

I couldn't see it, but I could hurt it.

Sure enough, it squealed when I put my other set of claws into it and *yanked*. The creature fell towards me in the darkness, a larger shadow getting closer and closer until I could plunge my claws into it again.

Blood showered my front, spraying onto my face and nearly blinding me. While I was distracted by losing the little bit of vision I had, the monster tore free with a cry.

Something moved again. My heart pounded, hand raised to catch it again.

This time long fingers caught my wrist.

The shadows were fading, and Akiva stood in front of me with blood on his own clothes, and his hoodie ripped nearly in half.

Behind him, the creature I assumed to be ‘Molly’ lay in a pile of blood and worse with Horus ripping daintily at her corpse.

“He’s gone,” the lich murmured, looking up at the high walls around us. “And he took the other one with him.”

“How did he *do* that?” I demanded. “That darkness, I mean. And the way he was just here all of a sudden.”

“I don’t know,” Akiva murmured. “It didn’t seem like his magic, did it? Perhaps he’s getting more in tune with what he stole.” He let go of my wrist. “Did he try to hurt you?” Belatedly Akiva looked me over, reaching up to wipe the blood away from my eyes.

“No,” I admitted, just as confused as he was. “He seemed disappointed that I couldn’t figure something out. And he wouldn’t let me go to you…” I shifted, then shivered in the cool wind that suddenly blew down the alley. “But he never really tried to hurt me.”

Even the thing in the shadows had seemed half-hearted.

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but I think you should take the whole *gang* with you when you go looking for him,” the lich admitted with a sigh. “This….*thing* is strong. Even I can admit that much. Either way, promise me you *will not* under any circumstances go looking for him on your own.” His green-gold eyes landed squarely on mine.

I blinked. “I already promised Cian.” He’d been there for that whole conversation. Or had he forgotten so quickly?

“Yes, but we all promise Cian things we all intend on tossing out later. *I* am not Cian. *I* will have no problem wrapping you in ropes and keeping you safe until I know you will not stick your muzzle into trouble.” His eyes narrowed. “Promise you will not go out alone.”

I held my hands up in surrender. “I promise, okay? Let’s keep moving, though. I want to see if I can find a trail. Or something.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 26

There was no trail to be found. Not then, and not in the days after it.

True to my word, I didn't go looking for the necromancer without Akiva or Indra with me.

Yuna joined us often, and sometimes I saw Merric skulking about in mirrors or as a fox on a rooftop.

I never commented on it. None of the others did, either, though I wasn't sure if that was because they were ignoring him or didn't know he was there.

The Necromancer did not show up again.

On the seventh night of searching with not even a sniff of magic, I called it off early. I was tired, and Aveline was off tonight. While she had been too busy with her own life to help me out with this, I missed spending time with her.

Pushing open the door to our house, I called, "Av, I'm home. Do you want to get pizza or something?" It was only one am. Some places would still be open, and I was starving.

Av walked out of the kitchen, a mug in her hand. Her golden hair was loose around her shoulders, and she wore a black, long-sleeved t-shirt that was too long for her, over very short-shorts.

My eyes narrowed, and I inhaled sharply in suspicion.

"Goddess, you act like my mother. Only she doesn't have your nose," Aveline snickered. "Yes, I would like pizza."

We stared at each other. She leaned against the doorframe and sipped whatever was in her mug.

“Aren’t you going to ask?” Her eyes met mine daringly. “I *know* you want to.”

“I could just walk in and find out,” I replied. “I don’t *need* to ask.”

“But you so want to ask.”

With a sigh, I closed the door behind me. “Does he want pizza? And does he have *clothes on*?”

“I could go for some pizza.” The familiar voice caught me by surprise, and I whipped around, eyes widening.

Baron Kriminel stood in our house, shirtless.

“Oh my Goddess.” I looked between them. “You are *not*.”

“The sex is *great*,” Aveline remarked into her mug. “You would’ve known sooner if you’d been around more.”

“I–“ I was flabbergasted. Baffled. Dumbstruck. My cousin was fucking one of the Loa in our *house*.

“Do the others know?” I demanded, looking at Baron Kriminel.

He walked to Aveline, his arms sliding around her waist.

She looked up at him, a fond smile curling over her lips.

They weren’t just sleeping together.

They were dating.

“Marinette knows,” Kriminel said with a one-shouldered shrug. “The others don’t get out as much. I doubt they’ll find out unless you tell them.”

“What would they *do* if I told them?”

Baron Kriminel took a moment to think about that. “Nibo would be very upset,” he said at last. “Mostly because it’s me, and he finds a reason to be upset at everything I do. I don’t see why the others would care. Why?” He grinned sharply. “Do you think my family will turn your cousin into a mouse? Or a chicken, perhaps?”

“I think I have enough going on right now without that even being a possibility.” I pressed my fingers to the bridge of my nose. “Pizza? Yes. We’re doing pizza.”

“I’ll get it,” Aveline offered, her phone in her free hand. “I was just getting ready to order something anyway. Didn’t think you’d be home tonight, George.”

I sighed and threw my keys down into the bowl by the door, my thigh bag on the table beside it. “Yeah. Me neither. But at this point, I might as well be chasing a ghost.”

“No luck with tracking down our necromancer?”

I met his gaze, surprise coloring my features. “How did you know about that?”

His ominous grin widened. “Did you think we would not keep *track* of your progress, summoner?”

“I didn’t think about it. And I haven’t tracked him down yet,” I admitted. I walked past them, kicking my shoes off, and sank down on the sofa. Both of them followed, and Kriminel perched on the other edge of the sofa while Aveline lounged in the chair. “I don’t get it. There’s nothing. No scent of magic. And he hasn’t killed again. But what he said…” I shook my head. “I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do with ‘uncrown the mother-saint.’”

“What did you say?” Kriminel leaned towards me slightly.

I raised a hand, then dropped it at my side. “I don’t know. Something that Merric told me the necromancer said when I had passed out. ‘Maybe she will pull out the pins before I uncrown the mother-saint.’”

“Who’s the mother-saint?” Aveline asked, looking up from her phone. She tossed it to the end table a second later, probably done with her pizza order.

I drew my legs up under me with a sigh, grabbing the blanket and spreading it over my lap. “I don’t know.”

“Could he mean *Maman Brigitte*?” Kriminel suggested. “She is *the mother*, after all. And the leader of the remaining Loa. Perhaps he means to dethrone her. Though…” he trailed off thoughtfully. “I have never heard her referred to as a ‘saint.’”

Caught up on his words, I asked, “Remaining Loa?”

Kriminel looked up, shaking from his thoughts. “What?” His blue eyes were pale, and he looked genuinely confused at my question.

“You just said *remaining* Loa.”

His eyes lightened further.

“I’m sure I did not,” he told me. “And if I did–“

“If you did, then you meant something by it. Were there originally more of you?” Maybe it wasn’t important.

Or maybe it was.

“It’s not something that you need to know,” Kriminel said carefully. “It was simply a slip up on my part to phrase things that way.”

“Can the Loa *die*?” My voice was too loud, and my question hung in the air between us in lieu of an answer.

Aveline shifted in her chair, her cornflower blue eyes on Baron Kriminel as well.

The Loa were said to be deities. The only ones of their kind and veritable *gods*.

Could a god be killed?

“You would do well to drop this line of conversation.” Baron Kriminel’s voice had gone very cold. “I have no intention of entertaining this further, Georgette.”

A shiver trailed down my spine like sharpened claws, and my insistence died on my tongue.

Whether they could die or not, I had a feeling I should not push the Loa. Not even one sleeping with my cousin.

“He likes *Little Children, Large Crowns*,” Aveline said, pointedly changing the subject.

“You do?” I raised a brow. ”Why? I have never met anyone else here that enjoys that.”

“It’s funny.” He was smiling again. Just like that. “I like watching humans embarrass themselves.”

IT WAS LATE BY THE TIME I WENT TO MY ROOM. OR EARLY, DEPENDED ON how I felt about four in the morning.

But I couldn’t sleep. I wasn’t tired, for some reason, and couldn’t seem to relax.

I sat down on my floor, my cards in my hand.

Last time I’d desperately needed their help, they had thrummed with magic that had surprised me. They’d come to *me* without me having to draw them.

It hadn’t happened since, but perhaps the magical energies were not impressed at my gallant attempts to provoke their advice over my breakfast choices.

Now I needed the help once again. I had a three-card spread in mind, preferring that right now over a full reading.

I wanted to know the *nature* of the problem I faced.

I wanted to know the *cause*.

And I wanted to know the *solution*.

Those things were easy for me to focus on. They were concrete ideas that I could fully wrap my head around instead of thrusting my magic into the unknown and fishing for ideas on my future.

I never needed to shuffle this deck, with its black patterned backs and worn out illustrations from so much use, but I did so anyway. Not to mix the cards better. No, that didn't matter. If a card was meant to show up in a reading, it would. No matter if it was at the bottom of the deck or across the room in a locked drawer.

I shuffled now to put my hands against as many cards as I could, letting my magic rub off of my fingertips and absorb into them.

Finally, I spread the deck into an arc in front of me, readjusting the candles at either side of my seated form.

A crystal pulsed with inner, magical light just inches from my leg, lighting my darkened room and sending waves of gentle magic over me and my cards both.

I'd never seen someone do what I was trying, and I was glad that I was alone. It was most likely not going to work, and I'd prefer to look like an idiot in front of myself instead of in front of someone else.

With that thought, I checked the mirror, just to make sure a certain kitsune wasn't preparing to pounce.

Only my pale face stared back at me, framed by my silver-blonde hair.

"What is the nature of my problem?" I whispered, knowing my cards didn't need to *hear* the words but doing it for myself all the same. I put my conviction and my question into every syllable, sending my magic towards my cards.

But I didn't draw one. I didn't touch any of them.

Instead, I held my left hand over the deck, palm down, and let it hover twelve inches above the cards. I closed my eyes, focusing on my magic and the cards.

Nothing happened.

I sighed, not particularly surprised, and noticed the jawbone necklace at my throat felt slightly warm.

When I opened my eyes, I nearly fell over backward with a gasp.

A *wolf* stood in front of me.

The Form of the Moon held steady, neither moving nor making a sound as I recomposed myself.

"You can't be here!" I gasped. "I didn't summon you."

It just stared at me, then very pointedly tipped its muzzle downward to look at my hand.

The Moon, upright, lay in my hand. Not the magical card that I used to summon the Form in front of me, but the actual card from my deck.

I'd never touched it. I'd never touched any of my cards, but here it was.

"The Moon. Upright," I murmured, unsure if I was speaking to the wolf or to myself. "It represents illusion. *Fear*." That was apt for what this card seemed to bring whenever it showed up.

"It means *you*," I told the wolf sourly. It flicked its ears towards me like it had heard and disagreed.

But that wasn't how these things *worked*.

Still, I had no reason to question it and no way to seek answers if I did.

"The nature of my problem is illusion," I said slowly. "Subconscious, fear–*secrets*." I broke off, staring at the wolf again. "The nature of my problem is a *secret*."

Just like the riddle.

But The Moon represented so much more than a secret.

The wolf sat down and lifted a spectral paw to its muzzle, nibbling on its pads like a real canine might.

I watched until it was done, and it fixed its ghostly eyes on mine again.

"What is the *cause* of my problem?" I asked quietly.

The wolf looked down at the cards. I reached out, my fingers near its muzzle, to hold both hands in the air once more.

Help me. I let the plea hum out along my magic that I cast into the cards, the invisible power sinking into them like water.

One card glimmered in my vision, my power building up on its surface instead of sinking in like the rest.

I plucked it from the arc and turned it over in my hand while the wolf watched.

It was the *Devil.*

A stark, white goat skull with curling horns was the most dramatic thing on the card. Under the skull, the Devil had his arms wrapped around two crying women and seemed to be pulling them back against himself.

The card sat upside down in my hand, the image reversed.

"Exploring dark thoughts," I quoted to my spectral wolf. "Detachment. Releasing beliefs that inhibit you." This card was normally a bit easier to understand, but today I couldn't see what it meant.

The nature of my problem was the *death toll*. And while there was no card labeled ‘Murderer’ with such a meaning slapped on, the Devil wasn’t even close.

“Yes it is,” I said to myself. “Detachment. Darkened thoughts.” I stroked my finger over the worn but glossy surface.

I wanted to speculate, but I needed to finish the reading while it was still at the front of my mind and my magic was fresh in the cards.

I reached out again, the words on my lips to ask for what I needed.

I never got the chance. Cards scattered from me like a small tornado had hit, leaving only the two I’d drawn now between the wolf’s paws and one left over in front of me, still face down.

My heart pounded, eyes wide as I stared at the floor, now bereft of my deck.

I’d hoped for an answer, but this was not the one I was expecting. The other cards had almost seemed desperate to get *away* from this one.

The wolf growled very softly when I reached for it, and I stopped.

“I have to know,” I told it. “I can’t be afraid of what it says.”

Quickly I reached out and flipped the card over, staring at it where it lay.

The Three of Swords was so rarely a welcome sight. Especially not upright, as it was now. Three jagged blades stabbed into a bleeding anatomical heart, sending dark red to pool at the bottom of the card.

As I watched, the other two cards slid from the wolf’s paws to line up with their companion, presenting me with a full picture.

“Betrayal is the solution?” My voice came out higher than I’d wanted it to. *Heartbreak. Grief. Hurt.* None of those things had pleasant connotations attached. There weren’t too many ways to take the card, and it normally meant something unpleasant.

I sat back, letting out a deep breath, and stared at my cards.

It wasn’t just the individual cards that held meaning in a deck. Sometimes I needed to look at the set up to see what they were trying to tell me as a whole.

Two out of three were major arcana. If a reading was dominated by them, as this one was, then it meant there were lessons that needed to be learned and big decisions to be made.

If another one had been reversed, I would’ve taken it that my cards were telling me I was not listening.

But I *was* listening. I just didn't understand.

Absently I picked up the first card, and nearly dropped it when magic thrummed along my fingers.

"*That's right. I'm a secret.*" The necromancer's voice seemed to echo in my ears, though there was no one else in the room.

My fingers slid to the second card. The Devil.

"*You just can't seem to look. Maybe there are too many obstacles in the way*." I remembered the way he looked at Merric.

No.

The way he'd looked at his *creature*.

I'd thought he meant to kill my friend. That he had thought to get him out of the way to prove some deranged point.

But what if Merric wasn't the obstacle at all?

What if his own pet was?

I didn't want to touch the Three of Swords.

Whispers filled the room. My wolf stood up, fur bristling, and continued to stare at me.

Don't touch it, George.

Don't touch it, please.

I'd never been afraid of my cards before. I'd never been afraid of my own magic like *this* before. Not even with the wolves.

But Goddess, I did not want to touch that card.

The wolf had moved closer, almost nose to nose with me, and I realized that if it wanted to hurt me, it could do a lot of harm with its teeth so close to my jaws.

My heart pounded in my chest, though I wasn't sure how much of that was because of the wolf and how much I could attribute to this strange reading.

The wolf closed the distance between us, leaning forward to rest its forehead against mine.

Its ghostly fur was soft against my skin, and its pupil-less eyes stayed fixed on my own.

I won't let it hurt you.

I jerked backward, covering my mouth with my hand to prevent anyone from hearing my shriek of surprise.

"You can't speak." It hadn't spoken, exactly. It was more like…a feeling. A series of feelings that had hit me so hard that I knew what they

meant and the truth of them.

It stayed where it was, one paw on the Three of Swords.

The necklace heated against my throat, and the wolf whined. It pawed at the card urgently, looking at it, then me.

"I'm going to regret this," I promised myself, leaning forward until I was nearly face to face with the Form of the Moon.

I reached out and touched the card, my hand brushing the wolf's paw.

Electricity screeched up my arm, causing me to almost pull away. The wolf leaned against me, its weight a comfort when the magic became almost too much.

"She doesn't see…" I recognized the Necromancer's voice again. *"Do you think…."* He trailed off. Someone yelled.

"*Do you think she will see before we uncrown the Mother's pet Saints*?"

"*I think you're full of nonsense,"* Merric's voice was a mumbled echo in my brain. He sounded hurt, as he had been, and like he was on the verge of passing out.

"*Tell her. Tell her I'll do it. I'll take the Mother's pet next. We'll do it. We have to do it. She knows why. Knows that we want magic that has touched the mother for what we're going to do."* The Necromancer's voice sounded urgent, as if he knew he only had a few moments to relay the message.

The voice was fading. Merric's reply was almost inaudible, and as he spoke the magic faded from my arm.

I opened my eyes, surprised to see the wolf already fading.

"Thank you," I murmured, reaching up and running a hand over its ear. "I appreciate–"

The Form of the Moon vanished as if it had never been in my room. The candles, too, suddenly went out, and I was plunged into darkness as all of the magic I'd used seeped into the floor, and out of existence.

Merric had been wrong. His voice had sounded so weak, like he had been on the verge of losing consciousness as I had.

He'd remembered wrong.

The *Mother's pet saints.* Not *The mother saint*.

It made a difference. It *had* to make a difference. Unfortunately, it didn't put me any closer to understanding what his riddle meant.

And if I didn't figure it out soon, someone else was going to die.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 27

It was a pity that Merric wasn't secretly here. Perhaps we could've puzzled the reading out together. Or at least been *confused* together.

Then again, he probably wouldn't have taken being *wrong* very well. I wouldn't rub it in his arrogant face or anything. But maybe he'd have some idea what the necromancer had meant if he knew what was really said.

Out of all of my lovers-if he could be categorized as such-he was the best at riddles and questions and the little details that hid in the shadows.

"Okay, George," I murmured, getting to my feet. I checked my watch, shocked to see that it was nearing six am. Had I really been at this for so long?

It hadn't felt like it.

I'd heard from everyone that today was not going to be a 'hunting through the streets' day, as Cian had urgent vampire king business, and even Yuna had something that couldn't be put off.

Of course, I hadn't heard a damn thing from the nogitsune himself.

Before I did anything, though, sleep was a necessity. I was exhausted, and staying awake until dawn wasn't going to make things any better.

The necromancer had never killed during the day, I reflected, crawling over to my bed without a frame–that my mother so often complained of me having–and draping myself across it with a sigh.

This was so complicated. *Everything* was complicated right now, and the reading that I'd hoped would illuminate me to what was going on, had not. Or at the very least, it hadn't slapped me in the face with any answers.

My eyes dragged closed. I was so *tired*. Even with the myriad of problems spinning around in my head, I couldn't fight how much my body begged for sleep.

Surely it would be okay for me to just get a little rest.

THE UNFORGIVING MUSIC OF MY RINGTONE PULLED ME FROM ONE OF THE best sleeps I'd had in a very long time, dragging me up from the comfortable embrace of darkness and into a room that was…

Not as bright as I'd expected.

Had the sun *still* not quite risen? Had I just barely managed to fall into a deep sleep, only to be interrupted?

My phone rang again, the not-so-dulcet tones causing me to reach out and grab it, as if muffling the noise with my palm would do anything to help me go back to sleep.

"Hello?" I mumbled, not bothering to check the clock. I didn't need another reason to be angry at being called before the sun was even up.

"Where are you?" Yuna's voice was sharp.

"I'm in *bed*," I informed her. "Where are *you*?"

"You're in bed? Still?" I didn't understand the incredulous tone of her words, and sighed.

"Yes, Yuna. I intend to be here until at least noon."

I felt myself dozing off again when she didn't answer immediately and was shocked back into partial wakefulness when she did speak.

"George, It's seven pm. Unless you just went to bed, you passed noon quite awhile ago."

My eyes snapped open, and I sat up, the blankets falling off of me. The crystal on my floor still glowed with dim light, and my room was silent.

"Seven *at night*?" I nearly screeched, getting to my feet hurriedly. "Holy *shit*. How in the world did I sleep so long?"

"You were tired, I should think," she replied, her voice brittle. *"And why is it such a big deal? You aren't going looking for him tonight anyway. Right?"*

My movements slowed. I looked down at the black skinny jeans in my hand.

"Right," I agreed offhandedly. "Yeah, I was just surprised. I don't sleep this long."

“Why don’t you come over?” The cecaelia invited, not sounding as welcoming as her words.

“I didn’t realize you were free.” I slid off my running shorts and replaced them with the jeans, trying to cradle the phone against my shoulder without much success.

“I’m not. You can wait at my house and order food. We can text until I get home. I won our bet, you know.” Her voice turned husky.

It did terribly unfair things to my body when she sounded like that.

“Why don’t you come over so I can collect my winnings?”

“That sounds hot,” I replied, putting her on speaker so I could strip out of my shirt. The shirt I’d laid out yesterday was black and made of a faux-leather type material that was shiny and slid against my skin. It was sleeveless, with a high neck that looked a bit like a scrunched scarf and pockets with zippers on each side.

“Is that a yes?”

“No,” I said with a very profound sigh. “But only because I’d prefer to come over when you aren’t just inviting me because you don’t trust me.”

Yuna was silent while I finished getting dressed. As I was pulling on my second knee-high boot, she said, *“It’s not that I don’t trust you.”*

“You think that if I’m not with you, that I’ll go do something stupid,” I accused, as if I wasn’t here, about to do something that probably fell on the stupid scale.

“I worry for you,” she amended with a heavy exhale of her own. *“I’ve discovered that you’re a bit like a dog with a bone when you get an idea or think you have a lead.”*

“That’s rude.” I grinned, as if she could see me, and went to the cabinet under my window with its tray of small bottles.

This was a new addition to my room. While potions weren’t my greatest interest, I did dabble here and there. Lately, Aveline and I had been ‘dabbling’ quite a bit.

I pulled four crystalline bottles from the tray, shoving them carefully into the pockets of my vest and zipping them in.

The Ward I sometimes used for protection was here as well. I wore it less lately, as it had really taken a beating with the vampires in the bayou, and recharging it took a *lot*, but I put it in my pocket as well. Just in case.

“Then tell me what you’re doing right now,” the cecaelia requested. *“Tell me I’m worrying for nothing.”*

I picked up the phone and sat in front of my vanity, staring at myself in the rectangular mirror.

I searched my room through the glass, the action more habit than anything, for any sign of Merric. When he didn't appear, I bit my lip. I was *actually* disappointed that he wasn't here. More than I thought I'd be.

While I wouldn't want to deal with him trying to stop me if he was here, I couldn't help but want him to show up all the same.

Get ahold of yourself, George, I chastised, leaning back in the chair. I didn't have the time to be mooning over someone who was inscrutable at the best of times.

"George?" Yuna prompted, worry tinging her voice.

"I'm sitting in front of my mirror," I said, pulling my still-platinum hair up into a messy bun to get it out of the way.

"Doing what?"

"Putting my hair up. I will now pick up the band and secure it to the dyed hair. My hand is around the base–"

"Stop. I shouldn't have been so general." She said something very low that I could not hear, voice edged in humorless amusement.

"What?" I asked, pausing to gaze at the phone.

"If you are going to go out, at least take Merric," she said, her voice nearly a growl.

"Oh…" I dropped my hands. "Yuna, I haven't talked to Merric since we were with the others. I don't think we're getting along right now."

"*What?"* She sounded puzzled. *"Since when? That's not the impression I was getting from him."*

"When's the last time *you* saw him?" I challenged.

"He was just here with me."

The words stretched between us. I bit my lip. I wasn't jealous. Not romantically, anyway. I knew that Yuna would cut him into pieces long before she felt any stirring of romantic interest in him, for one. Something dark seemed to curl in my insides.

But it reminded me uncomfortably of how I felt when I saw Indra and Akiva together, acting like the whole world didn't exist.

Cian, Indra, and Akiva all had each other.

Yuna and Merric were getting along more and more, and had become tight friends while I watched.

And yes. I liked them. I liked *all* of them.

But while they were together in pairs or groups, I was here.

Alone.

I chased the thoughts-and the feelings-out of my brain with a scowl. I didn't have time to be stuck on creating a popularity contest in my brain. I couldn't help if they liked me as much as they did each other, and I certainly couldn't spare the time to worry about it *now.*

"I'm just going to visit someone," I said finally, my voice low as something I didn't care to identify churned in my stomach. "I'm not going hunting tonight."

"Visit someone who's a friend? You promise me?"

She sounded so much like Akiva that I nearly snorted.

"I promise. I'm going to go see Nathanial, he owns a shop next to where I work, and I'm going to go home. That's it. Now, can I leave, please?"

Putting on eyeliner with a hand that wanted to tremble with nervous energy was difficult, but not impossible. I managed, giving myself something resembling a cat-eye.

I wouldn't normally care to dress up to go see someone I wasn't even remotely interested in, but this was different.

The Voodoo community didn't respect me. They didn't even *like* me, but that wasn't something I could change overnight. If I was going to go in there and expect them to help me with a riddle posed by a man killing fellow voodoo practitioners, I needed to look the part of someone who deserved their help. Not a witch out of her element who was barely sure of what she was doing.

It'd look even better if I had two of the Wolves of the Moon at my sides, keeping pace with me with their inner, spectral glow .

The jawbone at my throat warmed at the thought, and I sighed. It would be foolish of me to try it, since I'd most likely end up with the Form of the Moon out of control and the necklace snapping my powers off like a hard reset.

"Text me when you're done. Please?" Yuna asked.

"Sure. I'll talk to you later?"

"Yeah. I'll talk to you later, George."

I tapped the button to end the call when she had finished speaking, staring at my reflection in the mirror. She was just worried about me. I knew that. They *all* seemed to worry, if I had a chance to do something on my own. Was I truly so uninspiring?

My mouth twisted into a frown at the way my stomach jerked at that thought.

But if they couldn't help me with the answers I sought tonight, I wasn't sure what I'd do.

For now, I'd just have to take this one step at a time.

MY BOOTS CLICKED ON THE PAVEMENT AS I CLOSED THE DISTANCE BETWEEN my car and Nathanial's shop.

To my surprise, the man was locking up, his keys jingling as he shoved one in the lock. It was way before midnight, and too soon for him to be closing.

"Nathanial," I called, glad I'd put on a thigh-length black coat with a broad hood to combat the chilliness of the night air. "Are you leaving?"

The man turned to look me over, his brow raised as he appraised my outfit.

"Are you going somewhere that requires a performance?" He asked in his accented purr. "The double-thigh holster is a nice touch.

I glanced down at the newest addition to my wardrobe, running my fingers over the thick material. It was a lot like my usual bag, except doubled. Now I had a pouch on either thigh and straps around my thighs that reminded me of a gun holster.

I felt a little self-conscious at how dramatic the piece was, but I was tired of cleaning blood out of my favorite purse. This one had promised to be liquid-resistant, and I was hoping it lived up to that claim.

"I dress like this almost every day," I promised. "Just not so…well." It *was* a little more than my usual. Maybe Yuna's fine taste was rubbing off on me.

"What do you want?" He sounded curious, not unkind, but shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

I watched him with narrowed eyes, noting the way his eyes flicked from me to the door and how he couldn't stand still. "Something happened," I guessed, judging on his body language. "Something bad."

He looked down the street, craning his neck to make sure there was no one near us.

A glance at my own workplace showed me that even Marin wasn't around tonight. It made sense. She had somewhat sporadic hours due to her

own secretive schedule.

“Come on,” Nathanial ushered me towards him as we walked to a car parked along the empty street. “Something did happen,” he said when I fell into step with him beside the black, sleek vehicle. “But I don’t want to shout about it out in the open. I’m going to Johanna’s. You may come, if you wish, but…”

He held my gaze while I walked to the other side of the car.

“What?” I demanded, opening the door.

“They didn’t like you last time,” Nathanial reminded me. “I doubt they’ll treat you any better now. Especially now that she knows who you are.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “I don’t need them to treat me well.” Though it would’ve been nice, I thought, as I slid into the passenger seat beside him.

Nathanial slammed the car into drive, barely glancing behind him as he peeled out onto the street. I clutched tightly to the seat belt, my knuckles white at the haste and sense of urgency that pervaded the car.

Goddess, I hoped we wouldn’t get into an accident. That’d really be what I needed right now. Something else for my lovers to get worked up about. If I did have a car accident, would they become my personal chauffeurs?

“Someone else is dead, aren’t they?" My heart pounded in my chest, as if beating in sympathetic panic to Nathanial’s.

“Two more of my people are dead, as of an hour ago,” Nathanial said. “Just like the others.”

“Is their magic gone?”

This time he hesitated. “No.”

Then it *wasn't* just like all the others. Not like the last woman, whose magic had been taken and then had drifted through the breeze for me to find.

Why was she different than the others?

“Who were they? Were they–“ I swallowed the word *Bokor*, “Like Yvenson?”

His face was grim, and he shook his head.

I waited for him to speak, and when he didn’t, I sighed impatiently. “Nathanial, come on. What aren’t you telling me?”

“The two people dead weren’t like Yvenson,” Nathanial said, his face ashen. “They weren’t young, or naive, or so very close to becoming a

Bokor.” He glanced at me, as if he’d known what I was going to call the young, dead man.

“They were powerful. More powerful than you, or I, or many others here. It is suicide to try to hurt them, yet they’re the ones that are dead.” He hit the steering wheel, making me jump.

“If this…*creature* can so easily kill Ambrose and Cecilia, what’s to stop him from killing all of us?” The shop owner demanded. “Is that his final goal? To kill all of our elders?” As his anger rose, his heavy creole accent thickened, making it harder to understand his words.

Nathanial looked at me, his eyes off the road for longer than I thought wise. “Tell me, George. Where are the Loa now? Where are they, now that we need them to protect us?”

I didn’t know. I didn’t understand why they didn’t come to help their people, if they were so worried.

Instead, they’d sent *me*.

“They sent *me*,” I said, my tone brokering no room for disagreement. “For better or worse, they asked me to help you. And I *will* help you. We’re going to figure out what’s really going on here, Nathanial. And we’re going to stop them.”

He laughed, his voice hoarse. “Empty words, for someone who has no reason to care about us.”

They were not *empty words*. Hadn’t I already tried to do so much for them? Hadn’t I almost died for them? I snarled, my fangs out and sharp. He glanced my way, sudden fear sparking in his dark eyes.

“I *promised* you I would help,” I repeated. “Now, let me *help*.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 28

When he came to a stop in front of Johanna's house, I pulled my phone from my bag and stared at the screen.

There were no messages from anyone.

Because they were *busy*.

Was it my curse to have no choice but to act alone? The one day I had something happen was the day my companions were all busy.

Was I just that unlucky?

Or…did it have nothing to do with *luck* at all?

"George?" Nathanial touched my arm.

"Just a second," I said quietly, opening the messaging app and finding my chat with Merric.

I'm at Johanna's, and I could really use your help.

I wondered if he'd even know who or where Johanna's was. I hoped so. He seemed to know everything, and I didn't want that to change *now*.

I changed to my conversation with Yuna and hesitated.

She was going to be angry with me, but there was nothing that could be done. I sent her a similar message and waited for the little icon that would show that she'd seen it and was replying back to me.

It didn't come.

Last, I messaged my group chat with the troublesome trio.

And I waited.

My heart sank as none of them answered, though I had suspected that might be the case.

But even Merric? What pressing activities did the kitsune have tonight that he couldn't at least *text me back*?

“I’m ready,” I announced, pushing my phone back into my bag. I couldn’t just sit around, hoping they’d come save my damsel-ass from whatever distress I was about to walk into. Again.

Getting out of the car, I squared my shoulders and stared at the long sidewalk to Johanna’s house. The air was cold, and the street around us seemed eerily quiet. Barely any sound met my ears.

I’d just have to be my own damn knight today.

“She might not let you in,” Nathanial warned once more, falling into step beside me. He fell back slightly as we neared the door, wringing his hands in front of him.

I ignored him and tried to channel some of that confidence I’d felt at the gala.

So what if I didn’t have the dress or the magic flames.

I was still *me*. I was still the woman who’d walked into a room of people who laughed at her, and ended the night with a personal invitation from the head of the council herself.

A voodoo priestess, no matter how unfriendly, was nothing compared to the fear of my gala entrance, right?

Something rippled out of the corner of my eye as I neared the porch.

Glancing down in surprise, I found a small trail of harmless flame travel from my wrist to my shoulder, and more flames licked at my fingers. They were the same ice-blue as that night, and when I scuffed my boot experimentally, embers sparked in the air around my foot.

I smiled very slightly, a boost of confidence warming me to the tips of my fingers. If the Loa had enough faith in me to remind me of when I’d felt confident before, why didn’t I have that same confidence in myself?

“Thank you, Marinette,” I breathed, unsure of where she was and hoping she could hear me. The enchantment before had been her magic, after all. It was very safe to assume that this was as well.

I strode up to her porch with my chin high and didn’t react outwardly whatsoever when the door opened to produce a very sullen looking Johanna. I reminded myself to look confident. To not flinch away from her glare.

“What do *you* want?” She asked in a dull voice, sparing a glare for Nathanial as he came to stand at my side.

“The same thing as before,” I informed her. “To help. But for me to do so, I need you to be open with me.”

Johanna barked out a laugh. “Be open with *you*? What have you done for that privilege, *child*?” She spat the word like an insult.

I fought not to recoil, and flames licked at my skin.

Johanna’s eyes widened.

“I have faced the one responsible for killing your people,” I answered firmly. “I have spoken with the Loa, and they have been aware of my every step.” I lifted my hands, grateful for the fire that was hopefully going to convince her to let me in.

“Fire is not my own magic, but we both know whose it is.” Goddess, I *hoped* they knew about Marinette’s penchant for an open flame.

By the look in her eyes, she did.

“By turning me away, by insulting me further, you’re spitting on the help your patrons have sent you. I *cannot help you* if you do not *let* me.” My words sounded confident. I sounded so sure. But inside, I was terrified she might call me on them. I didn’t have a plan B.

I met her gaze challengingly, the flames dying down as I dropped my hands to my sides. “So what will it be? Will you let me in so that I can speak with you and your people, or will you tell me to leave again so that I have to fumble around in the dark and once again find this killer *too late* to stop another of your family from becoming his victim?”

Johanna held my gaze stubbornly, her lips thinning to a flat line.

“I do not know what games *They* play,” she murmured. “And I do not like them.” She opened the door wider, gesturing me in.

Embers still flourished wherever I stepped, though there was no more blue fire on my body.

I missed it. I *like* the flames of Marinette’s body outfitting me like an aura, though I would never admit it to the Loa.

Whatever I had expected to see, the fresh body of *another* voodoo priest was not it.

The older deceased woman lay on the dining room table, candles near her face and above her hair.

I stopped and stared, taken aback, and nearly faltered.

“Bernadette is-*was*-“ Johanna spoke like the word caused her physical pain. “One of the eldest and most powerful *mambo* of New Orleans.”

I wandered closer, very aware of the glares being sent my way by the few others in the room. I stared at her, marveling at the peace on her face

when so much of her was stained with blood. Why hadn't she been cleaned or prepared for a funeral?

My eyes fell to her hands. *Both* of them were completely intact. What had Tisiphone said before? That magic could be absorbed by ingesting someone's body part?

Disgusting, for one.

But for two, if the killer was so interested in absorbing the magic of a powerful voodoo priest, why not chop off a finger again?

Inhaling, I pushed my shift just enough to heighten my senses, though not enough for even my ears to peek through my hair.

Her magic was there, but it was being carried away. As if it was being picked up and carried out of the house by some undetectable wind.

Her magic was ebbing away, but I couldn't tell where it was going. It just seemed to…disintegrate on a breeze that wasn't there.

"Her magic is fading," I said, not quite shocked.

"We know," Johanna came to stand beside me, the worry on her face etched into every line and wrinkle. She pointed at the candles and the dried herbs between them. "Alice is monitoring it."

The girl near the dead woman's head glanced up at the sound of her name.

"But we do not know *where*. It is the same with Ambrose."

"The other dead priest," I said, wondering if *he* was missing any body parts. "May I see him?"

Johanna hesitated, but led me out of the room and into another, just off the kitchen.

The storeroom reeked of herbs and spells, making my eyes water and tickling my nose.

I rubbed my face, blinking away the tears that might make me look weak in the face of this woman.

But she wasn't paying me any attention.

Instead, she stared at the body of the man in front of us. He'd been placed on a wooden work table, and the same array of candles and herbs curved over the top of his head, wax dripping onto the wood and hardening.

The young woman at his head looked up and spoke before we could. "It's almost gone, Johanna," she said in a very soft whisper. "His magic… it's fading very fast."

I sniffed the air, unable to scent anything over what lay on the shelves.

A quick look proved to me that he wasn't missing any of his extremities, either.

Both he and the woman had had their throats slashed. The wide, gaping wounds were hard to look away from, though I did my very best to look anywhere but there.

"I just don't understand," Johanna breathed in the stillness of the dimly lit space. "They were our most respected. Even if this killer is one of our own, he goes against *everything* to kill those touched by the Mother."

It took a second. Two seconds, actually, for her words to sink in.

I whirled on her, eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?" I demanded. "What does 'touched by the mother' mean?"

Johanna gazed at me, confused. "You do not know? The Loa did not tell you?"

I wasn't going to admit how little the Loa *actually* helped.

"Let us return to the other room to give Alice the quiet she needs to prepare his body." She led me back out of the storeroom, then to the hallway where the portraits lined the walls.

Was she kicking me out?

Before I could speak, she stopped and gazed up at one of the hand-painted masterpieces. Johanna ran her fingers along the surface, barely brushing it.

"The Loa are not gods the way your Goddess is. We do not worship an unseen presence, or a legend."

I kept my mouth shut, wondering if she meant to insult my own religion.

"They are our *teachers*, in a way. It is not unheard of for them to lay a hand on a particularly promising young man or woman. Or even to teach them personally." She dropped her hand and looked back at me.

"Okay…" I bit my lower lip. "So Bernadette and Ambrose….they were taught by the Loa?" Is that what she was trying to say to me?

"They were personally chosen by *Maman Brigitte* many, many years ago," Johanna confirmed.

And hadn't Baron Kriminel remarked that Maman Brigitte was referred to as 'the Mother?' Hadn't Johanna herself just called her the same thing?

"But why them? There are others, right? Others chosen or taught by her?" I paced up and down the hallway, my eyes flicking from one old portrait to another.

“I do not know why them specifically,” Johanna said. “There are others, yes. Bernadette and Ambrose were some of her favorites, from what I have heard.”

“Is there anyone *else* who is considered her favorite?”

“There are many who claim the favor of the Mother,” the woman shrugged. “I myself have spoken to her as well. Does that make me a favored child?”

Did it?

“Was this it?” I asked, half to myself. “The necromancer-the one killing them-he said….He asked if I would take notice when he killed ‘The mother’s pet saints.”

“What does that mean?”

A bark of laughter left me. I was so close. I could *feel* that I knew the answer to this particular riddle.

Only I could not seem to guess at it.

“Come on, George, think,” I murmured, tangling my fingers in my hair. “Who are the Mother’s pet saints?”

I paced another step, my eyes landing on a man’s portrait. His name lay below it, as all the others did.

Paul Jean Louis.

Paul. Like…*Saint Paul*? I was no catholic, and any religion outside of my own was far outside the range of my interest, but my mother had driven me past St. Paul’s Academy almost every day as a child.

Quickly, I fumbled at my bag, drawing my phone out and smacking the screen to get it to turn on.

“What’s wrong?” Johanna wandered closer. “Something to do with Paul Louis? He’s been dead for many years.”

“That man in there. Ambrose.” I found my browser and hit the search bar, typing letters in as fast as I could.

Saint Ambrose.

It was a long shot. Absolutely a last ditch effort–

Pages and pages of results appeared about the catholic Saint *Ambrose*, and my heart pounded.

“Okay-okay, umm–“ I went back to the search bar, my hands shaking. “Bernadette, right?”

That *had* to be a saint. It even sounded saintly.

When I put Saint Bernadette into the search bar and clicked for my results, I was a bit embarrassed about how well-known she was, yet I had never heard a damn thing about her.

"The Mother's pet *saints*," I said, looking wildly up at Johanna. "He didn't mean it literally. He meant those people who the Mother laid her hand on or favored, who were named *after saints*."

I shoved my phone back into my pocket with a trembling hand. "Are there any others? Anyone else who has studied with Maman Brigitte or who knows her very well?"

"Well, there's…" Johanna looked down, biting her lower lip. Her hands knit together, the anxiety plain in her motions. "Alice, out there. She has met with Maman Brigitte in a dream."

"No…I think it has to be more than that. And they have to be named after a *saint*."

"*Child.*" Johanna fixed me with a very frustrated look. "Do you know how many of our babes are named for Catholic *saints*?" When I shrugged, she went on. "Almost everyone I know has someone in their family who was! John, Paul, Peter, just to name a few! I know *six* women named Agnes. *Six*. And don't get me started on how many women in my circle are called *Teresa*."

My heart felt like it was going to stop.

"Like Nathanial's mother," I whispered, my hands going clammy.

And she had *told me*, hadn't she? That she was one of the last who had studied with Maman Brigitte herself.

The necromancer was going to kill Nathanial's *mother*.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 29

"Nathanial!" I ran into the dining room where the shop owner stood with a group of his peers. He looked up at me, surprise in his dark eyes.

"George?" He looked over my shoulder, and whatever he saw in Johanna's eyes made the fear spark in his own. "What's wrong?"

"Where's your mother?" I demanded.

"My mother? Why?"

"Because she's not safe!" I grabbed his arm, having no time to sit and explain to him when we needed to have left already.

"What do you mean she *isn't safe*?" His voice was harsh, and he shrugged me off, catching up to me in an instant as I shoved open the front door.

"Something the Necromancer said to me-that he would kill the Mother's Pet Saints. He means he's killing those who studied with Maman Brigitte who bear the names of Catholic Saints."

The fear was very plain on his face now. He took off at a run to his car with me on his heels, and I barely managed to close the passenger door before he was racing out of the residential street.

"Why is he killing those who studied with the Mother?" Nathanial asked, slamming buttons on his steering wheel.

A phone icon appeared on the screen above the console, along with the word MOM.

The phone rang once, then twice.

Please let her pick up, I begged, hands shaking in my lap.

It went to voicemail.

Nathanial tried again. I palmed my phone, praying for any message at all.

Only Yuna had texted me back.

I barely read over her concerned words before opening the conversation to let my fingers hover over the keyboard.

“Where are we going?” I whispered when the call went to voicemail once more.

“We’re going to–to–“ Nathanial’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. He rattled off an address that I typed into the phone, trying to tell her in a succinct way what was happening.

I sent the same message to Merric, then hesitated.

Then I called him.

My hand clenched around the phone as it rang against my ear. I closed my eyes, praying silently to my Goddess that he would *please, please* pick up.

It also went to voicemail.

“I need you. *Please,* Merric. I can’t get anyone on the phone. I don’t know where you are. I don’t know…” I swallowed. “I sent you a text. If you can…*please*. I’ll give you whatever you want-another debt or *whatever*. Please just help me.”

I hung up, staring at the screen as if he might actually message me back on the spot.

Both of us were silent as Nathanial drove well over the speed limits of the city, taking turns that I thought would cause us to wreck and driving past other cars without any notice of their honking horns of rudely gesturing drivers.

No one called. No one messaged, even after I shot another one off to Indra and the others.

I was alone. I was going to have to deal with this necromancer *alone*.

Glancing over at Nathanial, I saw that his hands gripped the steering wheel so hard that it had to be painful. “It’ll be okay,” I said, with confidence I didn’t feel. “We’re going to make sure it is. How reliably does she answer the phone? Maybe she’s busy, huh?”

A small, hopeful smile turned up the corners of his mouth. “She leaves it all over the place,” Nathanial whispered. He looked at me, eyes wide. “Are you *sure?* Can’t there be some mistake? Maybe he’s done. Maybe it isn’t my mother at all.”

Goddess, I was right there with him.

“It might not be,” I agreed. “Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I’m *still* wrong, and your mom is just in the shower or watching her eighties exercise videos. Don’t all old ladies love those?”

His hands loosened very slightly.

Around us, the traffic had lightened up, and we were no longer in the city proper. Now the only buildings around us were houses, and each one had a more spacious yard than the last.

Finally, Nathanial pulled into a driveway that led through sparse trees, the trunks black in the moonlight.

When he stopped in front of a big, well maintained but still old house, all of the lights were off.

“Maybe she’s asleep?” I asked.

“Maybe.” His voice didn’t hold the same agreement as his words, and he leaped out of the car before I could stop him.

“Wait! Nathanial–“ I grabbed for his arm just as the smell hit me.

Blood.

And black magic, not far behind it.

Nathanial shook me off and ran for the porch, a *gris-gris* in his hand that hadn’t been there a few minutes ago. While it might make his powers stronger or act as some kind of protection, I wasn’t so sure it would be enough in the face of this necromancer’s pets.

“Nathanial, please! Don’t go running in like that!” It was absolutely too dangerous to do that.

Especially with just him and me here.

A creaking sound met my ears, dragging my eyes upwards towards the slanted roof of the house. I backed up a few steps, unsure of where the noise was coming from.

It was as if something was walking-no, *sliding*-across the roof. But what could be–

A face poked out over the edge of the roof that covered the porch.

“Goddess,” I choked out, my hands suddenly clammy.

Even in the moonlight, its face was grey and bLoated in death, and its eyelids were sewn shut. Its jaws hung open, the hinges loose as its head tilted first one way, then the other.

As if studying me.

It was one of the Necromancer’s monsters.

He was here.

“Nathanial!” I shrieked, taking a chance and sprinting up the stairs to the porch. The thing snarled and hit the ground behind me, but it was too slow. I was in, the door slammed shut behind me before it could catch me.

The monster hit the door, shrieking, and the glass windows rattled in their frames.

My heart hammered as I stumbled forward, falling into Nathanial’s back.

“H-hey! What–“ Why was he standing still? He caught me, steadying me and helping me regain my balance. “Nathanial, what are you…” I looked up at him, then in the direction he was facing.

There was blood on the floor. Blood, and one of the necromancer’s dead pets.

“That’s good, though,” I urged, though I wasn’t so sure. He never traveled with just one.

The proof of that was right outside the door, banging its protests at not being let in.

“I…” he swallowed and looked at me.

“Let’s find your mother,” I said, giving the monster and its place of death a very wide berth.

He followed, eyes still on it as if the thing was going to *move*.

The hallway was empty and very dark. I didn’t dare turn on any lights, fearful of letting any other monsters know exactly where we were.

Besides, I barely needed light. I could see well in the darkness, and my eyes adjusted quickly.

The dark house seemed surreal. Everything was hushed, with the loudest noise coming from the wind that shook the windows from the outside.

Coldness pooled in my gut, and the feeling only grew as I continued down towards the other end of the hall, where a door lay ajar, beckoning us with a soft light from inside.

“Mom?” Nathanial called, breaking the quiet with an uncertain voice that shook.

I could hit him for it.

Something shifted, and the door opened just a bit wider.

“I’m in here, Nathanial.”

I'd only heard her a few times, but Teresa's voice was unmistakable. My shoulders dropped in relief, and Nathanial pushed past me to get to her faster.

I followed a bit more slowly, confused at the feeling in my gut.

The fear should be subsiding. *Not* getting worse.

I'd reached the light now, and my boots glowed dark silver in the pale gleam of it. Nathanial pushed the door open, letting it fall back so that I had to push it open as well.

And I was so afraid. The feeling rose and rose. Like an orchestra playing a crescendo inside my rib cage and coming to a fever pitch.

My heart joined in, its tempo becoming quicker and quicker, though I could not place why every sense in my body was screaming at me to *run away now*.

"Mom…that thing. Are you hurt?" We were in the kitchen of his house, and the light that shone came from a small lamp on the table.

Everything had taken on a grayish hue, and it felt to me that I was viewing the scene through the filter of an old movie. The only sounds in my ears were Nathanial's racing heart and my own.

My foot landed in something wet that nearly made me slip. When I looked down, I saw that my boot was planted firmly in a puddle of something *black*, that had pooled in this corner of the kitchen.

Drops of it had been spread, however. I followed the trail of black with my eyes, trying to puzzle out what in the world I was looking at as my heart hammered against my ribs like a prisoner wanting to escape.

Then the drops ended, right where Teresa's own shoes stood stark against the pale floor.

I looked up, surprised that she hadn't turned to face either of us as the dread built in every fiber of my body.

"Nathanial," I breathed in the dead quiet of the room.

He made to go to her, but I grabbed his arm in a grip that brokered no disagreement.

The voodoo priest looked at me, then down at my hand. "Let me *go*," he snarled. "I am going to make sure my mother is all right."

"No." Because I knew what he would find. Some part of me had known ever since we stepped foot in this house.

"*No?*"

I took a deep breath, the words not wanting to form on my lips. If I said it, it would be real.

If I said it, everything in this room would *know*.

“She isn’t okay.” The shutters stilled, the wind coming to a dead halt.

Teresa’s head twitched, her hand spasming at her side.

“I don’t think she’s been okay for awhile now.”

“What’s wrong with her? She’s standing *right there!*” Nathanial tried to jerk his arm out of my grip and jerked back harder, keeping him in place.

“Because-I’m sorry Nathanial-but your mother is already dead.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 30

"She's not *dead!*" Nathanial tried to pull away again, but I kept my grip on him as waves of trepidation threatened to overwhelm me.

I didn't know what to do. My feet felt like they were nailed to the floor, and an overwhelming sense of failure tried to overtake the fear.

"Stop!" I snapped, letting my fangs lengthen. "Look at the *floor*." I gestured down to where I stood, at the pool of black *blood* near my boot.

Nathanial looked, his eyes widening as realization hit.

No one could lose that much blood and live.

Teresa's hand twitched again, the fingers jerking unnaturally.

"Then how is she…" Nathanial's words died on his lips.

We both know how she was standing there.

There was someone in this house who liked to play with dead things, and Nathanial's mother had become his shiny new toy car.

"We need to go," I breathed, taking a step back. I didn't know why she was just standing there, and I was sure I didn't want to know how long she'd stay like that.

Her head jerked to the side like she'd been hit. Nathanial made a soft sound in his throat and clenched my hand.

I couldn't imagine what he was going through. I had so much sympathy for him and wanted to see if he was all right…but that would have to wait.

Escape was at the forefront of my mind.

"Slowly," I murmured, tugging him back. "Come on, Nathanial. We're going to do this *slowly*."

He took a step, then faltered.

My heart stuttered, and I wanted to scream at him to move.

“What if she’s not really dead?” The voodoo priest asked, a hint of hysteria in his voice. “W-what if she’s just being controlled. That blood might not be hers–“

“That blood is most definitely hers!” I snapped.

Too loudly.

Her head jerked back this time, at an angle that would be impossible if she *was* still alive.

Nathanial gasped and surged *forward*.

“No!” I shrieked, losing my grip on him. I reached out to grab him again, but I was too slow.

“Mother!” Tears ran down Nathanial’s face. He held his hands out to her, and the gris-gris dropped from his fingers.

At last, I saw her eyes.

Or what was left of them. The left was gone, set in the side of her face that looked like it had been crunched on by an alligator.

My stomach rolled. I couldn’t look at that. No way could I focus on that part of her face. Blood and worse dripped from where her eye should’ve been, and I was glad that the harsh shadows hid quite a few details from me.

Her other eye rolled wildly in its socket, finding Nathanial first. Her mouth opened, just as Nathanial gripped her arms, and Teresa *screamed*.

The light went out.

“*Nathanial!”* I screeched, lunging forward and trying to find anything in the pitch black.

He cried out, and I heard the sound of something hitting the floor with a *thump*.

It had sounded like a body.

I stopped, panting, and stood in the center of the room as I listened. Was this thing blind in the dark? Like I nearly was? If I summoned a witch light, would it be on me before I could react?

A hiss sounded from my left. I dodged to the right, sprinting back out the open door and into the hallway.

Teresa came after me. I could hear her skittering on the floor with movements that didn’t sound like steps.

Stupidly, I turned to look over my shoulder, finally taking the risk and bringing light to pool in my palm.

It had been a definite mistake.

Teresa was following, her head lolling to the side as she ran at me on all fours with limbs that bent in every direction except where they were supposed to go.

Without thinking, I ran to the front door, focusing on just getting away from her and getting *out* of here. If I could lead her away from Nathanial–

I opened the door straight into the face of the necromancer's second pet.

It smiled, blood dripping from its face, and snapped its jaws shut inches from where my hand had been seconds prior.

I slammed the door in its face, knowing I was going to have to deal with at least one of them.

If I had to pick one, it was going to be Teresa. The old woman looked fragile and didn't have an alligator's jaws sewn onto her own. Surely that was the better option? Best case scenario, Teresa had pearly new dentures to chomp on me with.

As I pulled my magic up, focusing on what I wanted to summon, she leaped at me from across the room, just visible in my witch light.

I screamed as she took me down, surprised at her strength. While she had no fangs, she clawed and snapped at my neck, going directly for my throat to end it.

And she was *so strong*. I was sure this wasn't how she'd been in life, but Dead-Teresa pinned me to the floor easily, her long fingers digging into my wrists.

She had me, my arms pinned to the floor at my sides and her knee shoved into my stomach so hard I could barely breathe. I gasped anyway, trying again for my magic.

Teresa opened her ruined mouth wide, the skin holding the bad side of her jaw together shiny with spit and blood.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my fingers scrabbling on the hardwood as I fought to do *anything*. "I'm so sorry I didn't save you."

Teresa lunged downward, not hearing or caring about my words, her flat teeth aimed for my throat as my stomach clenched at the pain I was sure would come when she did bite into me.

She never got that far.

Opening eyes I hadn't realized I'd shut, I saw a pale, delicate hand on her throat, keeping her off of me.

As I looked further up, my mouth fell open in shock.

The Form of the Chariot stood above her. Her wings were spread in a brilliant display of white, and her long fingers dug into Teresa's throat mercilessly.

But I sure as hell hadn't summoned her.

Without me asking or giving her any sort of direction, the Chariot levered the old woman up and off of me. She then tossed her easily across the room and into a bookcase, where Teresa collided heavily and slid to the floor.

"But you…" I could handle the Moon doing this. Barely. But the *Chariot*?

She reached down a hand to me in a very obvious offer to help me up.

But I hadn't asked her to do that either.

Like the night in the cemetery, I could feel my magic flowing into her. But I wasn't controlling it, nor how she used it.

She just…did.

I took her hand, accepting her offer and letting her pull me to my feet. She lifted both hands, smoothing them over my hair as if she was a parent checking for injury.

"T-thank you," I stammered belatedly, still shocked out of any rational thought.

Was that a smile on her lips?

No. Surely not.

Her hands fell, and she was still. The magic flowing from me to her stopped, and she stood there as if I'd just summoned her and had yet to give her an unspoken command.

This was unfortunately not the time to dwell on my magic acting so strangely.

Teresa got to her feet, making strange keening sounds as she did so. Her body looked broken. That throw into the bookshelf hadn't done her any favors, that was for sure.

She didn't seem to mind, however. She just came towards me, one leg dragging behind her.

The door behind me *shuddered* on its hinges, a loud bang ringing through the room. Something cracked, and I realized the door wasn't going to last much longer under the assault from the Necromancer's other pet.

I needed to find him. I needed to stop him if I could.

Otherwise, I doubted these things would let me leave.

Making a split-second decision, I ran up the stairs that lay near the door, the Chariot following close at my heels. Was he up here, sitting in a room while his toys played downstairs?

Some of the rooms were open, and I stuck my head into them, acutely aware of the front door when it cracked and finally splintered.

Shuffling steps followed me up the stairs. I sent a thought to the Chariot, who turned to bar its way.

Though I wasn't sure how long she could hold it off.

And I wasn't sure what I'd do when-or if-I even found the necromancer. Should I just jump off the roof and hope for the best? I couldn't drive away, since Nathanial had the keys.

A stab of guilt and fear went through me. *Nathanial.* Was he dead?

Without him, I was alone.

Wait.

Surely someone had to have messaged me back. Surely someone had checked their phone by now.

I reached into the pocket of my pants, where I'd put my phone when we'd gotten out of the car.

It was gone.

I wanted to scream. Fear suffused my lungs, clogging every breath I took and Goddess how I wanted to *scream*.

Instead, I locked my teeth together, unwilling to put voice to my fear.

The Chariot screamed, rushing down the steps as she tried to push the monster away from me. I fed her my magic, hoping she could keep this up, and opened the door to the last room I hadn't checked.

It was the attic. Old and rickety, the wind outside sounded loudly against this room by whistling through the boards and creaking the windows.

And it was empty.

My heart sank, eyes running over the contents of the room. An old bed. A pile of boxes, a window–

The window was open.

I crept towards it, still half focused on the battle my Arcana faced on the stairs. It wouldn't be much longer before she was out of power completely, and her Form would disintegrate.

Outside of the window, just a few feet below the sill, lay the roof that covered the porch. This part of it slanted gently, like a ramp.

I laid my hands on the sill, arms trembling, and inhaled.

The scent hit me in the face like a truck once I let myself take advantage of my wolf's senses. Teresa's magic intermingled with others that I didn't recognize, and it seemed to tangle around my brain and yank me *upward.*

"Goddess, please don't let me die," I breathed, and climbed through the open window, resting my boots very carefully on the other side.

I climbed warily, the wind picking up and making me glad I'd put my hair up.

I wished for the seventieth time that I wasn't alone. Some part of me ached to prove to all of the ones I cared about that I was capable. That I could live up to the image I'd presented at the gala.

But most of me wanted to curl up and let someone else take care of the dead things in the house and the monster that controlled them.

As I reached the peak of the roof and balanced myself on it with legs that shook very slightly, I tried to find something-anything-that didn't belong up here with me.

The moon aided me. It shone down brightly, allowing me to take advantage and see somewhat clearly.

A shape stood up smoothly, thin and wavering in the wind.

I didn't need to see his face.

I knew who it was.

"You disappoint me," the necromancer chastised in a hollow voice. "I gave you everything. I wanted you to save her."

"I–" the connection to the Chariot evaporated. I knew what that meant.

I could only hope that she'd managed to take the monster with her.

That hope was dashed when the creature slithered around me, sneering up at me as it made its way back to its master on mostly-broken limbs.

I shivered, and forced myself not to move. It didn't try to attack me. It only curled around the necromancer's feet like some kind of messed up dog.

"You didn't give me anything," I said coldly. "If you didn't want her dead, then you shouldn't have killed her." I clenched my hands at my sides, magic ready to go once I figured out what exactly I should *do*.

The asshole lifted a hand and wagged a finger at me, his head mimicking the mocking motion. "If you have me, you want to share me. If you share me, then you haven't got me. What am I?"

This *again*?

I wanted to scream at him to shove his riddles up his ass. My nails dug into my palms, and my power *begged* to rip into this man who had done so much harm.

“All we have to do is wait, you know?” I snarled, not bothering with his riddle. “Once the Loa realize that you’re here with *me*, they’ll come for you. And I really don’t think it’ll take them long.”

He stopped. Confusion covered his features, and he looked around like something was going to happen. “The Loa? Come for *me*?” He repeated. “Do you honestly think–“ he broke off with a giggle. “Oh George, George. Poor *Georgette*.” I hated when he said my name. “The Loa won’t come *here*. Not when they know it lurks in the darkness.”

“What?” I blinked, taken aback. My fingers slid over something, and when I looked down, I found that I held The Moon in my hand.

All right. I could play along. If my wolves wanted a piece of him, who was I to say no? It was strange to feel their desire in my brain, and stranger still that they *had* a desire in the first place. They shouldn’t have.

I let the card disintegrate into glowing ashes that fell to the roof, forming once more into the shape of two spectral wolves, their eyes effervescent in the moonlight. “There’s nothing in the darkness except for your toys,” I snarled. “The Loa aren’t afraid of *you*.”

“They aren’t?” He leaned to the side, and the monster rose so he could brace his weight on it. “Of course. They’re afraid of *us*.”

“They aren’t–“

“Then where are they, George? Why did they send you to be their Jonathan Harker, instead of doing it themselves? Only, they must be so disappointed, don’t you think?”

That name struck something in me. A memory, of…

Of a movie.

A very old movie I’d watched with my mother, and many times since.

I loved old horror movies, and *Dracula* was no exception.

“You think you’re Dracula?” I asked, eyes narrowing.

The wolves circled me, eyes on the necromancer’s pet.

I wondered where Teresa had gone.

I also wondered if Nathanial was dead.

His face pinched in frustration again. “Of course I’m not Dracula. No, I’m not even worth the *insects,* am I? Locked up in this cell of mine…” he buried his fingers in his hair, mumbling nonsense.

All at once, he straightened, head cocked as if he was listening. “But I do it all the same, don’t I?” He murmured. “Even without the promises, promises.”

“You’re insane,” I accused, like it would make any kind of difference to *him*.

His head rolled forward so his eyes could meet mine. “Without a doubt,” he agreed. “But do you know what I *really* am, George?”

I held my breath. Would he tell me why he was doing this? Would he give me the satisfaction I wanted, no, *needed* in order to understand why he did this?

The necromancer beckoned me forward with one finger.

Stupidly, I took two steps towards him, the wolves not going far. Then another step until we were on the same peak of the roof.

“I’m not coming closer,” I warned. “What *are* you? Surely you can tell me. There’s no one else to know.”

His smile was slow, and there was something in his eyes I didn’t understand.

Agony. Tears fell from them when he blinked, carving rivulets in the dirt on his face.

“I’m a secret,” he said simply.

A skittering sound behind me made me turn, and a wolf at my side snarled.

Teresa was coming for me, jaws wide and eye wild.

And in front of me, the necromancer’s fashioned *pet* lunged, hands outreaching for my throat.

I was trapped.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 31

Time seemed to slow down. Teresa bounced off my wards, only to collect herself and lunge again. At the looming threat, my magic came to my hands faster than I could have imagined.

Two more wolves appeared, grabbing at Teresa and taking her down. The original two blocked the first, taking the hit that had been intended for me.

I looked down when my fingers curled around something unexpected, and I found the Aspect of the devil, her bladed whip, in my hands.

When had I even…?

No. This wasn't the time. The necklace at my throat was warm but not hot, and I needed to keep it from short-circuiting my magic.

I started to take it off, then paused. What if they did get out of control? What if Nathanial wasn't dead, and they hurt him?

I *had* to leave it on. Just in case.

Teresa rose, fingers digging into the throat of one of my wolves, and I lunged forward, striking out at her with the tip of the whip.

She didn't even try to dodge. It made contact with her face, but she barely stumbled, her attention still on the wolf in her grip.

"We've done this before," the necromancer said from somewhere at my back. "And I *remember* how that ended. Do you? Should we skip to the part where you're broken and shattered on the ground, hoping your monsters appear to save you?"

His words twisted around me, dragging to light my own insecurities.

“I remember too,” I said, unzipping one of the pockets of my shirt and pulling out a small, crystalline bottle. The opaque, shimmering liquid inside didn’t need any light to be brilliant on its own. Magic made it shimmer and caused bubbles to continuously form in the potion.

I tossed it at Teresa, and the crystal shattered against her skin.

When the potion hit the open air, it exploded into a ball of flame, magnificent in the night, and I lunged forward, hitting her hard with the blade tip of the whip. It cut deep, drawing blood, and when I pulled back, the end dragged through the potion, caught fire, and *blazed.*

Now the wolves and I harried her, forcing her back along the roof while the other two kept the second thing busy at my back.

She was so close to the edge that one more step would send her over–

Teresa righted herself and lunged for me, hands outstretched like claws as she let out that terrible shriek once again.

I moved, but the whip was in a bad position.

She was going to catch me, and that fire would burn me just as easily as her.

A shape appeared next to me, materializing from a tendril of my magic and leaping off of the roof to meet her.

The wolf caught her in its jaws and sent her back, throwing her over the edge and to the ground below. I ran to the edge of the roof, a second bottle in hand, and looked down.

There she was. Teresa’s body lay splayed on the grass, no sign of my wolf, and the flames flickered out on the ground around her.

Her hand twitched. A violent spasm that made me grit my teeth and had my wolves growling from where they stood beside me.

Before she could get up completely, I threw the second bottle at her, watching it fall and tumble end over end before the crystal met her face with a soft shattering noise.

She stared at me, her mouth opening and her hand reaching out as if asking for help.

And then her body erupted into flame.

But that look on her face….

I stepped back, suddenly full of misgivings. I clenched my hand over the handle of the whip.

She…she hadn’t felt it. She hadn’t been alive.

No matter that, in that moment, she’d looked like she *did*.

My stomach rolled, insides clenching and going very cold. I couldn't-she was *dead*, I repeated over and over to myself.

I hadn't just burned a living person who could feel it.

Goddess, what if *all* of his creations could feel what I was doing to them? What if they weren't just reanimated flesh and bones?

I blinked at the sound of my wolf's growl, only it sounded much louder than it had a moment ago.

When I looked down, I found that there were four wolves at my side. Another three harried the necromancer's pet, and worst of all, the necklace at my throat felt hot.

"No–" I whispered, reaching up to grab it. "No! I can't lose them!"

The jawbone burned my fingers, flaring white-hot and causing me to cry out.

As it did, the whip disintegrated to ash in my hands, and the wolves suddenly vanished.

I was all alone once again, with not even my magic to help me for the next few seconds.

Turning to look at the necromancer, I grit my teeth when our eyes met.

He hadn't moved. He barely seemed to care what was going on, and it occurred to me that it was a damn good thing he wasn't dead set on killing me.

The monster at his side moved around him, tilting its head first one way, then the other.

"I guess you still don't know, do you?" The necromancer asked almost mournfully.

"Know…what?" I asked, meeting his irritated glare with a look of confusion.

"He will not keep his promise," the necromancer shrugged. "He will not keep his promise when we get to London." His gaze turned mournful. "I never wanted them, Mr. Harker. The little lives, that are less than flies…" he spread his arms wide to encompass everything.

I remembered more and more of the movie now. It played inside my brain on a loop as I tried to pinpoint what he meant.

The thought made my hands clench.

My magic was coming back now. I could feel it surging in my body, and with just a little push, I had the Form of the Devil in front of me.

"I am a secret, you know. What am I, George?"

I narrowed my eyes at his words. He was calling me Jonathan Harker, again. But that made no sense. Jonathan Harker slew Dracula, not a necromancer, or–

“You’re Renfield,” I whispered.

If I was Jonathan Harker…well, he’d already told me his part in the movie, hadn’t he? Renfield. Dracula’s servant who’d been caught and put under the vampire’s control and promised the lives of flies and other little creatures.

He straightened like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, but that put it squarely on mine.

Hadn’t he said it? Hadn’t he *been saying it* this whole damn time?

Only I was too tunnel-visioned to understand.

“But who–“

“No, no we can’t, we mustn’t.” He pressed a finger to his lips. “The bats are everywhere. They cannot *know*.”

“Renfield,” I said again, more firmly this time. The Devil shifted in front of me, her hands curling around nothing as my own emotions flared.

Everybody needs a Renfield, he’d said at the warehouse.

But if he was Renfield, where was *Dracula*?

The sound of a vehicle caught my attention, and both of us turned to watch a black car peel into the driveway, breaks slamming as one door opened.

Akiva emerged, his blade in hand as Yuna did the same behind him.

“George!” She called, our eyes meeting.

Over the ground, a white shape shot towards us, tails streaming behind it as it ran for the house.

“Wait,” I said, looking at the necromancer again. “Wait, please. You have to tell me–“

He shook his head, and the monster at his side rose with gaping jaws. “We’re too late, too *late*. The townspeople are here, and that means he can give us his full attention.” The necromancer tipped his head back, staring at the moon. “Look. I think I see him now. Him and his *shadows*.”

I looked up as well, but saw only clouds. “What? But there’s nothing…” When I looked down, the necromancer was staring at me. The monster stirred again, and there were footsteps on the porch.

Merric apparently didn’t need a door. The fox surged over the roof, coming to stand at my side.

The man didn’t speak. His monster rose, rearing backward and opening a mouth that should have never existed. It let out a deafening scream and lunged forward, coming straight for me.

I threw the crystalline bottle at the form of the Devil as she moved, fast and low along the rooftop to meet the creature. The fire exploded on her, but my magic could not hurt her.

When the flames touched the monster, however, it screamed again, giving me time to direct the Devil to grab its throat in her flaming hand. The other she used to grab the mouth, keeping it up and away from her.

Beside me, Merric’s form changed until he stood on two legs at my side, radiating darkness and cold.

Before I could even ask what he was planning on doing, the fox lifted one arm, blackness spreading from his fingertips and up his arm like spidery veins.

Power swirled around his fingers, flowing like little rivers of magic, and then exploded outward.

Like hooks, they sank into the necromancer’s pet, pulling it down to the roof and forcing it there.

“Do it, George,” Merric whispered, the blackness swirling up and over his shoulder.

I looked at him, suddenly caught by the way the fur on his tails was darkening, turning to an inky black.

His ears, too, turned dark, until he was like a velvet nightmare beside me.

When I stared for too long, he looked at me with black, *black* eyes. There was nothing there except an abyss that almost hurt.

He’d told me before that I’d seen his true form.

Had he lied to me?

“*Now*," he snarled through fangs that curved to dangerous points.

Snapped out of my shock, I looked to the necromancer again.

“I’m sorry,” I said, lifting my hand as the Devil rose too. She was all aflame now, her body alive with the halo of fire that radiated heat. I wasn’t sure what I was apologizing to.

Maybe it was all the people who went into this monster.

All the people I was about to incinerate.

I didn’t let the thought shake me. I urged my magic to rise to a crescendo, then sent the swirling inferno and shape of the Devil down onto

the monster's shrieking, struggling form.

The effect was immediate. As she dug into him with her hooked claws, the flames ate at him. Soon the blaze was too bright to look at, and in it I could feel the Devil disappear.

My arm fell, and Merric lowered his own a second later. He moved, but when I looked, he was gone.

A cry from the other side of the inferno met my ears, and when I looked up from the blaze, I saw that Merric was blocking off the necromancer's attempt of escape.

"Wait!" I called, sure that we were about to have company in the form of my other friends. "Merric don't–" he didn't. He lifted a hand that the man recoiled from as if hit, but did nothing more than that.

I approached them warily, hands clenched at my sides.

The necromancer turned, tears running freely down his face.

"Who is your Dracula?" I demanded, hoping to use his own words to coax the answer out of him. My heart pounded in my chest-I *needed* to know. I needed to understand–

He sobbed. "I don't want to." He wasn't talking to me. His eyes were wide and full of terror, but no longer fixed on me.

They were fixed on the flames.

"Please…I don't want to *burn*," he begged, and took one step closer to the heat of the fire.

He shuddered, then looked at me with one hand outstretched as if asking me for help.

"I should have never invited him in," he whispered through the tears.

And threw himself into the fire.

I couldn't help but watch. I couldn't help but see the flames licking at him, his skin cracking, while his screams grew in pitch. And his *face*–

My vision was cut off suddenly as cold arms wrapped around me.

"Don't look, George," Merric whispered, wrapping his tails around me like a furry barrier between me and *everything*. "Don't look. You don't want to see."

His skin warmed as he held me to him, and from the corner of my eye, I saw his tails fading from black back to their brilliant white.

When I finally looked up at his face, I saw the blackness recede from his eyes, returning them to their normal yellow.

"I know what he meant," I whispered, my hands shaking.

There were footsteps on the roof now. Someone else was calling my name.

Merric watched me without a word.

“You heard him too,” I accused very, *very* softly.

“Not know,” he breathed, pulling me against him again. “Later, but not now.”

His tails moved, letting me see over his shoulder. Cian stood there, and behind him the flames died as Indra stepped into them and nosed something that I could not look at.

“Did you find Nathanial?” I asked, fingers curling in Merric’s shirt.

“If you mean the guy in the kitchen, he’s fine,” Cian promised. “Akiva is with him.” He looked over his shoulder, then back at me with a worried frown tugging at his lips. “George…” He blinked as if he didn’t know what to say.

“You stopped him,” Yuna said as I straightened.

The kitsune stared at the dying embers, looking at the body that I couldn’t force myself to lay eyes on.

“He won’t hurt anyone else,” the cecaelia went on as my eyes found her face. “You *stopped* him, George.”

Had I?

My mind flashed back to what he’d said–what he’d *been* saying since the first time I’d met him.

Maybe he truly was insane, and his rambling were just that.

Maybe now, the killings would stop and my brain could stop feeling like everything was still so wrong.

My eyes landed on Cian, who walked around the fire with Indra in his hellhound shape picking his way *through* the inferno like it wasn’t hot at all. He nosed at something I didn’t want to look at, then snorted.

Surely, if there was something more to find, they would find it. I had to believe that with all of them here, I could stop worrying about the necromancer’s riddles if they did not find cause to worry either.

Once the adrenaline wore off, I was sure I’d feel differently.

Or maybe not.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 32

"You're *sure*?" I asked, crossing the floor of my room again with my phone held to my ear. The carpet of my room was soft to my bare feet, and I was surprised I hadn't worn a hole in it yet.

"I'm sure, cher." Nathanial sounded tired. It had been only a few days since his mother's funeral, and his entire community would be in mourning for months, if not longer.

They'd lost so much in the span of one night. First Bernadette and Ambrose, then Teresa. All of them had been elders in the community and valued highly.

"I just worry…" I carded my fingers through my hair. "But if you hear of any other voodoo practitioners being killed, you'll tell me?"

"I'll tell you," he affirmed. "George…" he trailed off, as if he wanted to ask me something.

"Yeah?" I murmured.

"Nothing," he said at last. "Come visit soon, all right? I need a little noise now that…" I could hear him suck in a sharp breath. "Just come visit soon."

He didn't wait for an answer. Nathanial hung up. I felt strange. Anxious, like I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Our conversation hadn't done much to settle my nerves.

I stared at my phone and the messages from my lovers that had gone unanswered. Indra had invited me out, as had Yuna, but I just needed to be *sure*.

Aveline had been here as well, with her new Loa boyfriend. They'd both asked if I wanted to go to *Euphoric.*

I'd turned them down too.

With no answers to my changing magic and no way to know if the necromancer had been telling the truth, I couldn't help but think I should be doing something more than…whatever it was I was doing with my time.

But it'd been ten days. Wouldn't the necromancer's *Dracula* have attacked if he'd been telling the truth?

Movement caught my eye. I glanced up, seeing Merric's furry white shape in the mirror.

In my reflection, he perched on my shoulders, eyeing me disdainfully.

"Shouldn't you be out with the troublesome trio?" I teased, a small smile spreading over my lips. "I *know* they invited you to go see *Couch Mayhem* tonight."

He rolled his eyes as if he hadn't practically kidnapped me to see *When Couches Attack* only a few weeks ago.

"They only invited me to get you out of the house." The fox's image vanished, replaced by Merric's real reflection as he plucked the phone from my hand and set it down on my vanity.

I turned, surprised that he stood behind me. "You're really here," I murmured. "I thought you might not be."

"When are you going to stop looking for problems to stick your nose into?" he asked flatly, his arms in the pockets of his light hoodie.

That made me look away. I brought my hands up to soothe away goosebumps on my arms that had appeared at the sight of him while trying to think of how to answer him.

"I…you *heard* him," I reminded the kitsune. "You heard what he said. About all of it."

"I did," Merric agreed.

"Then you know what he claimed. That someone was out there controlling him. *Making* him do it."

Merric nodded conversationally. "Yeah, I caught that part too."

I held his eyes, then looked away. "Forget it," I mumbled, running my fingers through my messy hair for the tenth time this morning. "You don't really understand–"

Merric caught me as I turned, crushing me against his chest and pressing his lips to mine. Caught off guard, I gasped, and he took advantage

of my open mouth to let his tongue tangle with mine while his hand at my lower back gripped my shirt hard.

“You’re right,” he growled, nipping at my lip as he pulled away. “I don’t understand. I can try for you, George.” Our noses brushed as I refused to look away from his gorgeous golden eyes. “But I don’t.”

“I know,” I breathed, drawing my arms up and over his neck to pull him down to me. I thought he might protest. I thought he’d push me off and remind me not to touch him. But he let me hold him. “It’s okay. I’m not asking you to change for me.” I gave him a half-smile, relaying that it really was all right.

It was so strange. I’d never dreamed of being able to touch him like this, not even during the past week when I’d *wanted* to. But now it was happening, and I felt a connection between us that felt too solid to be my imagination.

“I eat what you’re afraid of happening,” Merric went on, drawing me backward across the room. “All of their pain and their fear. It makes me strong. He lifted a hand between us, his fingertips blackening, and drew it down my cheek.

His skin was like ice, making me shiver, but it was the allure of his touch that had me leaning forward.

Goddess, I wanted him.

“But nothing has happened in two weeks,” he continued. The cold magic faded from his fingers. “Two *weeks.* Your killer is gone. You stopped him from hurting anyone else on that rooftop.”

“We stopped him,” I amended. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

A flicker of surprise flashed in his eyes. “Yes you could’ve,” he denied. “You didn’t need me. I only made things–“

This time I was the one to kiss him. I couldn’t help it. I wanted to believe him, and I wanted *him*.

I was so tired of worrying about everyone and every*thing.*

I just wanted my kitsune.

He pulled away first, eyes wide. I met his gaze challengingly, grabbing his hands that rested on my hips and pushing them lower so that they skimmed my thighs, just below my shorts.

“I want *you*,” I told him frankly. “And if you try another trick like what you did at the gala, I will use my cards to keep you here for a *week*.”

A very familiar smirk curled over his lips. He looked up at me, every bit the trickster I knew him to be. “Is that a threat, George?” He asked in a whisper.

“Absolutely.”

I couldn’t tell him, but him being here did more than just make me want to tackle him to the bed.

It made it just a little easier to breathe. It made the urge to call all of my contacts around the city itch just a little less.

His tails curled around me, pulling me out of my thoughts. One brushed my thighs, just under the curve of my ass where my shorts ended, and another wrapped around my waist.

“Consider me threatened,” he murmured, his hands running up my ribs and dragging my shirt with them.

Everywhere his fingers touched me tingled, and heat shot straight to my core.

I helped him with my shirt, tossing it to the other side of the room and hearing it slide down the door.

He glanced at it, as if remembering something. “Aveline?” The kitsune asked simply.

“Gone with her new boyfriend. We’re alone,” I said, grabbing for his hoodie.

He pulled it over his head, along with the t-shirt under it, and I rested my hands on his hips, marveling at the pale softness of his skin.

While the kitsune watched, I ran my hands up the planes of his body, stopping when I got to his collarbones. With a glance at his face, I dragged my nails lightly downward, eliciting a shiver I hadn’t been expecting.

Before I could do it again, however, he grabbed my hands, holding them up and baring his teeth in a soft growl.

“Fair’s fair,” he said, gesturing to my bra and releasing my hands.

“Fair’s *not* fair,” I chuckled, unclasping it and chucking it towards the door as well. “You got to do all the touching at the gala. I should get to do it now.”

“No.” His tails recycled my wrists, then drew them down and away from my body. I marveled at their strength and the way they felt like fur-coated iron against my skin.

“You could be like, a nine tailed lemur,” I pointed out with a giggle. “Your tails could let you swing from trees.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m going to let that go because I have better things to do than acknowledge it,” he informed me. “But you can expect me to remember it.”

Still holding my wrists with two of his tails, he stepped forward to trail his fingertips up my bare sides again.

I shuddered.

He slid them back down, pushing my shorts down over my hips until they could fall to the floor so I could step out of them.

The air was cold on my skin, and I bit my lip at how *vulnerable* I felt with my wrists bound and my clothing gone.

Merric looked at me. *Really* looked at me, his gaze dragging up my body.

“I shouldn’t have let you leave that room at the gala,” he told me, reaching out and resting his hands on my hips.

I tried to move my hands, and he grinned. “Nah, ah–not yet, George. Not until I say so.”

One tail wrapped around my throat, the brush of fur sensual and luxurious.

His hands moved, though I couldn’t look down to see, and I held my breath as they ran up my thighs, then curved around to cup my breasts.

A low whine left my throat, and Merric’s smile widened.

His fingers found my nipples and he brushed over them lightly, teasing them to hard peaks.

“You could at least get naked,” I breathed, licking my suddenly dry lips. My thighs clenched, begging for his touch lower down. “Give me something to look at here, since I can’t touch.”

He chuckled. “All right,” he agreed, completely unexpectedly. His tails slid from my wrists, and finally from my neck.

I didn’t give him a chance to play any more tricks. Quickly I reached out, curling my fingers into the front of his jeans and *jerking* so hard that the button popped free.

“Just so we’re on the same page,” I smiled up at him, pushing his jeans down his thighs. His underwear came next, and his shoes, until at last he stood in front of me completely bare.

When he started to move, I beat him to it. I reached up with one arm around his shoulders, dragging him to me so I could catch his mouth in

another kiss. His length brushed my thigh, prompting me to reach down and curl my fingers around him.

He gasped. There was no way for him to play it off, and I pushed him a few steps back until he was at the edge of my bed.

If I'd thought I'd push him down, however, I was sorely mistaken. The kitsune grabbed my hips, using his tails to help overbalance and push *me* onto the bed so that I landed gently on my back, arm still around his neck.

"Don't be arrogant," he breathed, sinking down between my thighs and pushing my knees upward until my feet rested flat on my bed.

My heart thudded in my chest, and I silently begged for him to do more than just *look* at me.

Merric obliged. He kissed me, mouth trailing down my jaw and nipping a line down to the hollow of my throat. The brush of his teeth made me shiver, just as the feeling of his fingers on my inner thighs made me whine.

"I need you," I gasped, breathless at the sight of him kneeling between my knees.

"You *want* me," he corrected, eyes flicking up to meet mine as if to see how I'd react.

I hooked a leg over his shoulder and grinned. "Need," I argued.

Was that surprise in his eyes? Whatever it was, he hid it quickly by turning to nip at the inside of my knee, his hand gripping my leg as he bit down just hard enough for me to feel it.

I watched him–it was impossible not to, as he kissed his way along my inner thigh, until finally he leaned back just enough to blow lightly, teasingly, over my clit.

"Merric," I whined, squirming on the bed and digging my heel into his shoulder.

"George," he replied, his fingers brushing up and down my slit. "Say please."

"Please." I wasn't too proud to say it. I'd say it *more* if it meant he would do something more than tease.

Goddess bless him, he did. He sank a finger into me, eliciting a gasp from me, and at my encouragement, added another one.

"So wet for me." I couldn't tell if he was trying to admonish me or just happy about the fact.

He sank his fingers deeper into me, his palm grinding against my clit. I bit my lip, hips arching off the bed while he fingered me.

Merric's free hand trailed up my thigh, gripping my hip as he curled his fingers inside me. I watched him through my lashes, teeth in my lower lips.

“I thought you wanted me on my knees for *you*,” I teased, resting my weight on my elbows so I could watch him more easily. “Remember that–“

He cut me off, lips slamming against mine and the hand on my thigh moving to grip the base of my throat.

“Don’t question my kindness unless you want me to *stop*,” he purred, then nipped at my lip when I started to answer. His grip around my neck tightened just slightly, mouth meeting mine again and forcefully urging my mouth open so he could coax my tongue against his.

The movement of his hand quickened, and Merric swallowed the sounds I made as my hips moved of their own accord to meet his hand.

Goddess, he felt so good. His fingers felt so good inside me.

“Fuck me, please,” I whined against his lips.

“Say it again,” he growled in reply with a light bite.

“*Please*. Merric, I will say anything you want to hear as long as you’re in me *very* soon.”

He huffed a laugh. “You’re that desperate for me?” He breathed. “My fingers aren’t enough?”

I caught his jaw with my hand, forcing him to meet my eyes. “Everything about you is more than enough,” I breathed. “Anything you give me is *enough*, but I want to feel *you* inside me when I cum.”

The look of shock that crossed his features was very quickly replaced with desire. He pulled his fingers free, instead lightly gripping his length and lining himself up with my entrance.

When he sank into me, I didn’t try to hide my moan of appreciation. He felt so good, and his body was so hot against mine.

My eyes closed, head tipping back so I could appreciate him as he rocked his hips lightly, pushing deep inside of my body.

“Look at me,” the kitsune breathed, one hand on my hip again.

I opened my eyes, surprised to find his face so close as he leaned over me.

“I want you to look at me while I fuck you,” he went on. “I want to see you.”

His voice was quiet, but his tone was full of promise.

The nogitsune moved, pulling almost all the way out just to sink into me once more.

I gasped, one hand going around his neck to drag him just a little closer.

When I did, he rocked into me again, building into a languid rhythm that let me feel every inch of him as he moved.

When the hand on my hip moved to tease my clit, my muscles clenched around him, causing him to let out a soft noise of his own.

“Just like that,” I encouraged, refusing to let go of my grip on him. I wanted him *here*. Close enough that I could feel his breath against my lips and that I could read the myriad of expressions that flitted across his face. “Please, Merric. You feel so good–“

He surged forward to bite at my lower lip, his low growl reminding me he was anything but a tame lover.

Not that I ever wanted him to be.

Heat built in my body, making me more urgent as I met his thrusts with my hips, my grip on him unrelenting.

His fingers on my clit sped up, lips curving into a sly grin at my keen of surprise.

“Merric–“ I bit off my words, mouth open and panting. I could feel my release building, heat spreading from his touch.

I trembled all over, the feeling rising very quickly.

“Cum for me,” he breathed softly. “Just for me. I want to feel it, George.” He moved to nip at my throat, teeth finding my skin and biting down hard.

I lost it. Whether it was his teeth or the heady combination of him and his actions, I wasn’t sure, but my release rushed through me, causing me to cry out and tip my head back.

His teeth on my neck didn’t relent. Neither did his pace. I held him against me, not wanting him to stop or pull away.

It only took a few seconds for him to follow me over the proverbial cliff. He grabbed my hips, face lifting so he could crush our lips together as he thrust into me one more time.

He moaned, and I swallowed the sound greedily as he came in me, my legs wrapped around his waist to keep him just as he was.

At last, Merric pulled away slightly, mouth open and panting as his gaze found mine.

“You might be stuck with me now,” he whispered, one hand leaving my hip to trail down my face.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. It is *you* who is stuck with *me*,” I snickered in response.

Merric snorted, shaking his head at my teasing. I pressed my lips to his again, drawing him into a long, slow kiss.

As I came down from my excitement, however, the doubts seemed to creep right back in.

And all of them were accompanied by the necromancer’s drawn face.

“George?” Merric cupped my jaw. He searched my expression, and sighed. “I know you’re worried,” he said at last.

“What if someone is still out there, trying to do something worse?” I asked, voicing my fear for the first time. “And what if they come take revenge on *us* for what we did?”

Merric grinned, the look reminding me of when he’d killed Jameson in the warehouse. I couldn’t help the shiver that went through me, but the kitsune didn’t seem to mind it at all.

“Then we kill them,” he said simply. “Yuna, me, and the trio. I know you don’t like to draw first blood, but I promise you this, George.” His lips brushed mine affectionately.

“We aren’t afraid to kill for what’s ours.”

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for reading *Bury Their Bones*. If you enjoyed it, please take a moment to leave a review!

The book couldn’t have happened without my amazing team of Betas, my saintly editor, and my mom. Thank you guys for everything you do, and all the awful drafts you guys read for me. Really, you’re all saints.

Thank you Hope for all the things you put up with. Including my bad time management and questionable ideas. Without you, I’m not sure how I’d get by.

OceanofPDF.com